

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 10

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Volume 10

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and these anthologies are published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

Over 210 stories were submitted and have now been published as a seventeen volume set with five additional bonus volumes, titled *Love's Landscapes*; this edition is Volume 10.

Words of Caution

These stories may contain sexually explicit content and are **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating over 210 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in e-print involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Over the course of seven months, nearly forty members chipped in to help at various times; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

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These stories are works of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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LOST AND FOUND

By Eileen Griffin

Photo Descriptions

Human photos consisted of three males, two—who each have short hair and some beard scruff—in a loving embrace on their bed, and the last one who is thinner and smaller boned, pale skin with longish black hair in a thin T-shirt and low-slung off-white pants. Cat photos consisted of two long-haired Maine coon cats with tortoise-shell coloring, and a tan and black colored smaller cat with very short hair.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It came as no surprise to anyone when we declared our intention to live together, we'd been closer than litter mates growing up and neither of us had ever looked twice at any of the females. It makes things easier all round, gay Felis are more than welcome in the Clowder as they pose no threat to the Toms. We help out with schooling and looking after the kits, do odd jobs for everyone and look out for the safety and security of the whole clan.

About a week ago, the ruling Queen gave us a new job. To look after this young man, barely out of kitten-hood, and keep him safe. He's not from round here, which is obvious if you look. We run to heavy bone, muscle and long fur all of which is useful in the cold and rugged landscape we live in. He's different, lithe, extremely agile and totally naked! Well, when in cat form anyway. The only difference when he's human is that he sometimes wears clothes. He's opinionated, bolshy and likes the sound of his own voice—in both forms.

We aren't sure what we are keeping him safe from, but the threat is obviously very real—he's woken us with night terrors, but won't talk about them. Trouble is, whilst we keep him safe—there is no one keeping us safe from him. For years it's been just the two of us, but both of us feel more than a passing attraction for our charge. How do we deal with this difficult situation to make things right for all of us?

Thank you.

Sincerely,

K

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: acceptance, cat-shifters, civil war, hurt/comfort, loss, m/m/m

Word Count: 20,369

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Dedication

A huge thank you to the Goodreads M/M Romance Group for hosting the Don't Read in the Closet event—I had a blast doing this! Also a tremendous amount of gratitude goes to Jaymi for her help with editing and Helena for giving me one more set of eyes on this work. Lastly, I want to thank Nik, my sometimes cowriter and full-time best friend. She never fails to support me in any endeavor I undertake and routinely talks me down off the ledge when I need it. I'd be lost without her.

LOST AND FOUND

By Eileen Griffin

Prologue

Tanner

The thin strip of light from the trap door barely illuminated the cramped attic crawlspace. A loud boom tore through the silence making the roof shake from the tremendous force of it.

That one was close. Too close.

For weeks, since the edict had been handed down, the two shifters had been hiding in the abandoned buildings of the warehouse district, eating nothing but scraps and going out only to seek out the most recent news they could find. Passages out were few and far between now and escape had become paramount to all else. Most knew they should have gotten out last year; hell, even last month would have been better than the risks that faced them now. Now, it was truly a do-or-die situation. Stay and face a certain bullet through the brain or escape and face a metaphoric one from starvation.

Save for the slim chance of making it across the border, the odds weren't good. But they were the only odds they had right now.

Despite the loss he had already encountered, Tanner knew they had to risk it. He had lost everyone he loved during the first wave of the purge. Since then, they had only been surviving, not living. He wasn't sure what life existed for them past the border, but he'd be damned if he at least didn't try to make a run for it.

The blue mark signaling the next passage had been posted on the lone light pole at the far end of the park two nights ago. Through sheer luck and the cover of darkness, he had made his way into the safe house and up to this attic. What should have been an appearance of two was accepted with sad resignation by the owners of the house that it was only an appearance of one. The family appeared calm as they led him through the house to this hiding place, even though he knew they were risking their own necks by aiding shifters. Whispers carried through the cracks to the attic told him enough to know this would most likely be their last attempt to help his people. They had taken too many risks already for people who were as different from them as night and day. It was something Tanner could respect, but not fully understand.

The sirens that had been so close just an hour ago seemed more distant now. With no way to see out of the attic, Tanner could only hope the patrols were

moving to the next quadrant. When he could no longer hear them, a muffled sound came from below him. Within an instant, light flooded the crawl space.

“It’s time.”

With his heart hammering loudly in his chest, Tanner crawled down the rickety old ladder and onto the second floor of the clock shop. Without another word, he was rushed down the stairs to the main floor. Through the open back door, he could see a nondescript work van waiting. It was now or never. He closed his eyes briefly and sent up a small apology to his mother that he couldn’t have done more to save their small clan, then he walked the rest of the distance to the van and jumped in. As the van began to move, he wondered whether he would end up with the real bullet or the metaphoric one at the end of this journey.

Chapter 1

Bram

Bram looked out over the fields and took a deep breath. The winter chill had finally broken and the air was already ten degrees warmer than it had been yesterday. He only had minutes to enjoy the sunrise before he had to head inside to get ready for work, but he took in everything he could about the yellow and orange rays spilling over the landscape as he stood there in the early morning hour.

The soft rustle of leaves to his left alerted him that he wasn't alone. Not wanting to give anything away, he closed his eyes and took another deep breath, giving the impression of complete relaxation. The scent that wafted across the distance to him told him more than any visual cues could. It was male and spicy, with just a hint of citrus. He leaned forward on the balls of his feet just as the footsteps paused behind him. Without any warning, he turned his body and lunged at the figure behind him.

"Ooomph. Shit, Bram! Do you always have to do that?"

Bram grinned down at the man he had pinned underneath him. Damn, Ryder was handsome. No matter how many years they spent together, he seemed to get more and more desirable. Grinning wider, he slid his hands along Ryder's body, grabbed his wrists, and pinned them above his head.

"Yes, I do. Especially when you try to sneak up on me like that."

Ryder's golden eyes darkened when Bram tightened his hands around his wrists, pushing them against the ground, as he locked his knees around Ryder's hips. Before he could speak, Bram leaned down and captured Ryder's lips with his own. The resulting moan rumbling against his lips made him simultaneously aroused and pissed off that he had to be at work soon.

When they finally drew apart, Ryder's unsteady breath fanned over Bram's lips. "We'll have to revisit this scene later. Especially your hands around my wrists because, well, that's hot. For now though, we need to get our asses in gear and get to work. I know you don't have class until noon today, but didn't you say you had meetings this morning? And I can't be late to the office. Again."

Bram's sigh matched Ryder's, all of his arousal deflating as he thought about leaving the warmth of the body under him. He dipped his head down one

last time to brush his lips over Ryder's, then shifted his weight to sit next to his lover and best friend.

"I'm ready to go. I just wanted to catch a glimpse of the sunrise since the winter was so brutal this past year. Seems like forever since we've seen a proper sunrise or sunset."

His body shivered when Ryder's hand slipped around his waist, his fingers barely brushing the skin under Bram's shirt. Not wanting to move just yet, Bram searched for anything to keep them right here in this moment.

"What's on your agenda today? I do have some meetings, then a class at noon and another at two, but after that I'm done. Think you can knock off early today? Maybe grab a bite to eat before we head home?"

"Unfortunately, I have a long day today. The chancellors are meeting to discuss the civil war in Callatown, and I have to be present to give my thoughts on the situation. Some of the local clan leaders want us to join forces with them and intervene because they fear the unrest will spread outside Storm Clan's boundaries. Others are urging us to remain neutral for fear that involvement from neighboring clans will make the situation escalate. Basically, it's a 'damned if we do, damned if we don't' situation."

Bram's heart clenched when he watched the carefree joy of just a few moments ago bleed out of his lover's golden eyes. The situation to the south of them was getting worse week by week. He knew they were safe in the mountains, but the threat of another shifter purge against the Sky Clan, like the one during the '40s, was enough to make anyone nervous.

He wrapped his arms around Ryder's stockier frame and pulled him close. He knew they were safe, but the thought of losing the man in his arms right now caused his body to shudder. As if reading his mind, Ryder turned his head and gently brushed his lips across Bram's stubbled neck.

"I'll be home around six o'clock. Why don't I pick something up on my way home and we can eat outside before the sun goes down?"

Bram hummed in approval, dipping his head down to capture Ryder's lips. "And after the sun goes down?"

Ryder chuckled softly against Bram's lips and smiled. "That will be the thought that sustains me throughout the day." He kissed his lover one last time and pulled away. "If I don't leave now, though, I'll never leave. And then, I'll be out of a job. And as wonderful as staying here all day with you sounds, I happen to love my job almost as much as I love you."

As Bram watched Ryder turn and walk back toward their cabin, he called out, "Love you, too."

His breath caught when Ryder turned back around, his face lit up with a smile that made Bram's heart beat faster. He winked, then made his way across the yard to their cabin. Wanting just a moment longer before he left for work, he faced the sun again and closed his eyes. These eight years together had done nothing to dampen the flame that burned inside him for his mate. If he lived a hundred more years, each one would be complete if he had Ryder by his side.

With the day just beginning and the warm sun on his face, Bram could tell it was a harbinger of good things to come.

Chapter 2

Ryder

“We’ve got to do something besides just sit here and watch the atrocity unfold.”

Ryder sighed and brought out another list of statistics to add into the mix of what was already on the conference table before them. It had been going on like this for almost two hours, neither side any closer to making their case, each one citing numbers and laws that either prevented or supported their involvement. Some were even calling for an order from the Queen to close their borders to anyone outside the Sky Clan.

The Queen, Lady Estrella, stood up from her chair at the end of the table and pulled the latest findings toward her. She had remained silent the entire time, watching the proceedings with her hands steepled under her chin. Ryder was amazed at the restraint she’d shown. If he were the one in charge, he would have lost his patience an hour ago when it was evident the clan was too divided to agree on anything.

“Enough. We’ve beaten this topic into the ground and are still not getting anywhere.”

The buzz in the room quieted down immediately, all twelve sets of eyes now focused on their clan’s sole leader. Ryder had always admired her gentle leadership, but today he more than admired her calm restraint.

“The situation in Callatown is tragic. Everyone here is in agreement with that. And as much as I would love to intervene in every conflict that involves shifters—both inside and outside of our clan—our resources simply won’t allow us to do that.”

The chancellors, who had pushed for neutrality, all nodded their heads in assent with Lady Estrella’s declaration. She allowed that comment to settle, then raised the page of statistics she had picked up.

“This, however, is no common situation. As much as I don’t like to interfere with inter-clan disputes, the Storm Clan’s abuse of power against the River Clan does present a problem for us.”

A few chancellors who had been nodding only a moment ago began to protest, to which she simply raised her hand, staring down at them until the protestations fell away.

“We will redouble our efforts to provide a safe haven for the refugees who have been able to escape the atrocities there. In addition, General Grey will be dispatched immediately to meet with the Stone Clan’s Council of Elders to offer whatever support we can give them since they are the closest clan to the affected area.”

A general sigh echoed around the room. Half were of relief, half were filled with dread over what the consequences of the regent’s actions would ultimately have on their clan.

“We will not, let me repeat, *not* wage war on another clan. However, we are no better than butchers if we allow one clan to exterminate another for what they claim to be a purge to contain their race’s purity. This has never been our way, and I refuse for us to begin now. I thank you all for your input today, but my decision is final. I’ll have Sandpaw forward the notes from today’s meeting to you all, along with any and all information about General Grey’s talks with the Stone Clan as it comes in. For now, this meeting is adjourned.”

Ryder watched as the chancellors and advisors packed up and stood to leave. The atmosphere in the room was no longer charged with passionate debate. Instead, a somber tone had taken its place, leaving the room much quieter and colder. Sky Clan hadn’t seen anything similar to the purges currently taking place in the South for almost seventy years. The threat had always been there, but the mountains surrounding their village and their peaceful ways had insulated them longer than Ryder had been alive. His head still reeled from the horror stories his grandparents had told them of their own experience during the pogroms of the ’40s, images that still haunted him even though they had only been described and not seen. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. This wasn’t the ’40s and the threat wasn’t at their doorstep. *Yet*. Time would tell how much Lady Estrella’s plan would affect them.

As he gathered his paperwork, a hand on his shoulder startled him out of his thoughts. When he turned, his gaze met the crystal blue one he had been carefully studying all afternoon.

“Lady Estrella. Did you need something before I leave?”

“Just a word before you go.”

“Of course.”

Her gaze was clear and confident. Their clan’s history had been filled with strong leaders, but the one who stood by his side right now had compassion to complement her brains. As eager as he was to get home to Bram and lose

himself in the comfort of his lover's embrace, to erase the statistics and grisly information they'd pored over today, he knew his regent warranted his attention more.

"What are your thoughts about today's meeting?"

Ryder sighed and placed the documents he'd just gathered up back on the table. As he sat across from his regent, he knew this conversation could go one of two ways. He could give a standard noncommittal reply and be out of this room and in Bram's arms within the hour, or, he could be honest and tell her what his gut said, damn the consequences. He rubbed his hand over his tired eyes and decided his dinner with Bram would have to wait.

"My heart tells me we should help everyone who needs it, Lady Estrella. And not just the clans to the South, but the ones on the coast who were recently hit with those awful storms, as well the ones to the West who have been struggling with full integration amongst the non-shifters. My gut, however, tells me that no matter how much we would like to help, we neither have the resources nor the time to help everyone. I know we deserve it after our own experience with the purges, but we've been lulled into a false sense of security here in the mountains. Our borders are easily protected, we've had a peaceful détente with the non-shifters for decades now, and the nearest clan is not only our ally, but our main source of information and trade."

He paused and looked down at the most recent statistics again. There had been an estimated one thousand casualties since the war between the clans began. At least another two thousand or so hurt or missing. Some of those were the refugees currently living in the shelter the Sky Clan recently erected for them, but many were lost without a trace.

"But?" His queen's voice drew his attention back to the conversation and away from the macabre statistics.

"But, we can't turn our back on those in need either. Our shelter is almost at capacity, even though their numbers have been slowing down over the past month. That said, the refugees we've taken in have been respectful and more than eager to help out around the village. Our relationship with the non-shifter community shouldn't be a problem with our current peace accords in place, and we've been more than fortunate economically to handle the influx of new mouths to feed and shelter."

He paused again and swallowed back his nerves. "My gut tells me it's a war that will only end in more bloodshed, so I fear we'll ultimately have to do

something. But for right now, I think our borders should be open to any refugees who want to seek sanctuary here.”

Ryder felt his tension ease a little when Lady Estrella smiled and nodded her head. “Remind me again why you haven’t sought out a position as chancellor?”

He cocked his head, pretending to think about it, then chuckled. “Because I like being able to go home to a hot meal every once in a while?”

When she placed her hand on his forearm and squeezed in understanding, he knew exactly the reason he hadn’t sought out a position on the advisory committee. The higher administrative jobs jaded those in office into seeing only black or white. They took a stance and dug their heels in, refusing to budge on anything but their own agenda. He could do more work behind the scenes accumulating data and research that helped his regent make the most informed decision. Yes, he loved going home at a decent time each day to Bram, but this was work he felt pride in. Work he knew he was good at.

Lady Estrella turned and looked at the clock hanging on the wall. “I’ve kept you long enough. I hope your meal is still hot once you finally make it home.”

Ryder took that as his permission to go. He gathered his things once again and stood to leave. Before he got to the door, Lady Estrella’s voice carried over his shoulder to him.

“Please tell Bram thank you for allowing me to keep you late this evening. He’s lucky to have you as a partner.”

Ryder turned to face her one last time, his cheeks heated with emotion. “I will, but I’m the lucky one. Have a good evening, my Queen.”

Chapter 3

Tanner

The sirens were getting closer. Tanner knew it was now or never if they wanted to make a run for it. As he rounded the corner, searchlights illuminated the shattered window of what once was the local bar. Many a night, he and his friends would come here to take a break from their studies or jobs. Once or twice he'd even had to crawl home after that first drink led to two then four. Now, all that was left was a gaping hole where the tables and chairs had been. There was no Desmond at the bar waiting to give them another round. No Winston on the small wooden stage crooning out the latest lyrics he'd just written.

As much as he wanted to drop to his knees and mourn the loss of his friends, he continued to run. A hand grazed his shoulder as a figure ran past him. Finn sprinted ahead of him, pushing his legs even faster to reach the next corner before the searchlights found them.

When Tanner saw the lights sweep back down the street, his body froze. Everything seemed to go in slow motion as he watched Finn run directly into the light, his shout drowned out by the sirens blaring from the speakers attached to the roofs of the buildings.

"Nooooo! Finn!"

Ice ran through his veins as the spotlights followed Finn's progress down the street. A cry tore through Tanner's throat as he struggled not to follow after his friend. Once he heard the helicopter above, he dove against the side of the bar, his chest heaving from fear and anguish. His body contorted against the hard brick wall as the shots rang out down the street. A final guttural cry rent the night, then was silenced.

Tanner's sobs shook his frame as his stomach roiled. He dropped to his knees and held his head in his hands, screaming at the injustice of it all. They were so close. Why Finn? Why now?

The sound of boots clacking on the pavement was immediately followed by the sound of the safety being released from a gun. When he lifted his eyes, Tanner's gaze met a steely blue one. They had found him. After months of hiding, they had finally found him. He closed his eyes as the man placed the

gun to his temple. As his body shook he realized, they hadn't been close enough.

A hand on his shoulder shook him. Instinctively, he batted it away, wrapping his hand around the wrist and struggling with its owner. "Just fucking kill me and get it over with!"

"Shhh... Tanner. You're safe. It was only a dream. Shhh... You're safe here."

Tanner's eyes flew open, the lights overhead blinding him temporarily. He recoiled from the hand on his shoulder and shuffled towards the end of his bed. Before it could erupt from his mouth, he bit down on his lip and stifled the sob he felt building inside him.

As his eyes adjusted to the lights above his cot, a cool glass of water was placed in his trembling hand. Tanner chanced a quick look at the person standing by his cot. It was Arya. Again. She'd been the one to show him around the shelter when he first got here. She'd been the one to talk to him, telling him about the community's news and goings on, even though he rarely spoke a word back to her. And it was Arya who had come to him more than once to wake him from the terrible nightmares that had been plaguing him for a solid month. They always ended the same way, with a pair of cold blue eyes staring at him and a gun pressed to his temple.

He took a long drink of water before setting the glass down on the nightstand next to his cot. As grateful as he was that his passage had been successful and the Sky Clan had taken him in, he still felt lost. Even though the weather was warm, his thin clothes left him with a perpetual chill. When Arya had suggested he get new clothes from the storeroom, he'd opted for only one other pair of jeans and a thin T-shirt. It was silly, he knew this, but his clothes were all he had left from his life before. True, it hadn't been much this past year, but it was the only home he'd ever known.

"Wanna talk about it?"

Arya's voice pulled his attention back to her as she sat down on the far end of his cot. That was one thing he was more than grateful for. No one had pushed him to talk. No one had pushed him to tell what had happened during the months he lived in Callatown once the Storm Clan had declared war on the River Clan. Everyone, especially Arya, had left him to his silent grieving. His stomach knotted with guilt. This made four times this week he'd woken up screaming with nightmares. He knew he was freaking out the other refugees staying in the shelter, but he couldn't seem to stop the ghastly images from

invading his sleep, no matter what he did. A simple glance at the clock on the wall showed it was only three in the afternoon. For fuck's sake. He couldn't even take a nap without the nightmares invading his sleep.

Tanner cleared his throat and shook his head. "No, but thanks for the water."

Her green eyes reflected all the sadness he knew she felt for him, but he didn't want someone's pity. He wanted his family and friends back. He wanted the fucking war to end so the shifters weren't tearing each other to pieces because of slight differences that shouldn't even matter to anyone. He wanted to get the hell away from everyone. Being around these people only made him miss the loved ones he had lost that much more.

"Tanner—"

"Don't. I don't want your pity and I don't want to talk." With still trembling hands, he pushed up from the cot and stood beside it, hating the fact he couldn't even look Arya in the eye.

"Thank you for the water and for checking on me, but I need some air."

Before she could utter a response, he flew out of the room and through the side door that led outside. He all but ran past the children playing in the yard to the back of the property that sloped down into a ravine. Without a thought as to where he was going, he ran to the nearest tree line, his legs giving out once he was swallowed up by the giant oak trees. He leaned back against the hard bark of the closest one and fell apart, his chest heaving as the sobs finally erupted from his chest.

The tears ran freely down his face as the memories of the past year assaulted him. It was hard enough that they came at him during his waking hours, but to be held captive by them night after night while he tried to sleep was pushing him to his breaking point. Not that he slept much anymore.

At least today the room had been almost empty when his screams began. The worst was when he thrashed around during the night, awakening everyone else who shared the common sleeping area with him. Those were the times he hated the most. A full audience to his psyche's inner fuckedupness with nowhere to hide from their pitying gazes because it was the middle of the night.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but the tears had stopped and his breathing was still shallow but no longer ragged. To no one at all, he lifted his head and screamed. The echoing silence made his desolation that much more pathetic.

“Pathetic! That’s what I am! A fucking basket case who can’t even move on with his life even though I made it out of that hellhole.”

His chest clenched tighter as he thought back to Finn, his mom, hell, all the people he’d lost along the way who would never have a chance to move on with their lives because they didn’t have them anymore.

The agony of it all tore through him. Before he even realized what he was doing, he scrambled to his feet and all but tore the clothes from his body. With the trees as his cover, he closed his eyes and pulled all his energy inward. The familiar snapping and stretching of bone and sinew rang in his ears as the pain of not shifting in so long caused him to drop to his knees. By the time it was all over, his normally pale skin was covered with a fine fur. He cocked his head to the side and sprinted through the forest.

Faster and faster he pushed his sorely neglected muscles, working them harder than he had in almost a year. The shelter receded in the distance with each fall of his paws. The memories of loved ones and friends cut down before their time blurred into oblivion as his instincts took over, and he ran.

Chapter 4

Bram

“All right. On my count. Three. Two. One.”

Before Bram's eyes, five teens sprinted across the field. One by one, their human forms morphed and folded in on themselves allowing their felis forms to emerge. Trotter and Ply were naturals at shifting, never once breaking their stride as their bones and muscles contorted into their feline forms. Tabitha, Grant, and Heath had stumbled, but still managed to keep from stopping completely as their bodies shifted. Their appearance mimicked that of Maine coons—well, maybe Maine coons on steroids. Larger than house cats, feline shifters were roughly the size of pumas once they passed the kit stage and had made the transition to full adults. Their initial coming out had been a shock, to put it mildly, for the non-shifter population. All the appearances of a simple house cat with a size that was, admittedly, intimidating.

By the time the students had reached the far end of the practice field, all five had fully shifted and were running at top speed. There was a tussle of sorts when Trotter tackled Grant to the ground, but the growls they made deep in their throats were playful instead of angry, so Bram left them to their play while he recorded their times. As a physics professor, he was always interested in the mechanics of shifting and the different range of abilities of his species. So once a week he hosted the high school students who were in the Physics II class to some practical physics in their everyday lives. Gifted and usually bored senseless with their regular classes, it gave both him and them time to have fun and learn in a more relaxed setting. It was a boost to his normal routine to see their growth and progress every week.

Progress. That seemed to be an oxymoron these days. When Ryder had finally made it home last night, he was exhausted. They'd still taken their meal outside to enjoy the warmth of the sun's dwindling rays, but instead of a romantic dinner, they had spent the majority of their time talking around mouthfuls of food.

Bram's stomach had twisted when Ryder told him about the meeting with the council of advisors and chancellors. But his heart had swelled with pride when Ryder spoke of his private meeting afterward with Lady Estrella. Ryder's insight and intelligence had often been overlooked in their society, and it was

past time their clan members appreciated just how much he brought to the table with his ability to crunch numbers and then apply them to real-world situations. Being an academic and statistician was one thing, but being a gay academic had pigeonholed them both into almost a feline-non-grata in their clan. Not that they were the only gay shifters around; but the general consensus was that a clan's strength depended a lot on the shifters' strength, ability to protect, and that ever-so-sticky quality of being able to reproduce more felis to protect the clan. All these qualities were held by a tightly prized group of Toms. Being heterosexual seemed to be the magical key to protecting their boundaries and keeping them safe.

Bram snorted at that thought before turning his attention back to his students. They were all getting into the fray now, their bodies twisting and contorting as they pounced on each other. It was fun to watch, but it would serve them well if they ever found themselves in threatening situations. He sighed as he closed his notebook of their progress. His talk with Ryder had gone deep into the night, neither one able to come up with a solution that had evaded the Queen's council for these past months.

"The problem is, we're too far removed from the situation in Callatown for most of our clan to realize its severity. So even though the threat is always present and could creep up on our doorstep any day, most of our community simply doesn't get the atrocities that are occurring between the Storm and River Clans," Ryder had told him once they had gone inside and were lying in bed together.

"But doesn't the number of refugees we've taken in recently make them realize how bad it is down there?"

Ryder had lifted up on his arm to look down at Bram, a pained expression on his face. "I'm not sure if it's that they don't realize it, or they don't want to realize it. The whole 'ignorance is bliss' mentality is a hefty one when our way of life hasn't been disturbed in almost seventy years."

"What about the ones who are pushing for us to intervene? Is that even a possibility?"

Ryder had shifted to turn off the light, then aligned his body next to Bram's before answering. "I guess that will depend on what happens when General Grey gives his assessment after meeting with the Stone Clan. If they decide to move, I can't imagine the current force we have right now will be enough."

They had spoken no more that night, each one finding comfort and strength in each other's arms. Bram's mind had twisted over everything they'd talked

about for hours after Ryder had gone limp next to him, his soft snores the only break in the silence of the darkness. As he looked out over the field, his heart clenched. The Toms had a sizeable force already, but he agreed with Ryder—more would be needed if they planned to intervene in the South. And as his gaze rested on the five young shifters roughhousing at the end of the field, Bram knew just where those extra numbers would come from.

Two hours later, Bram entered his office at the university and knew something was up. Ryder, who never got off work early, was standing by his bookshelf thumbing through the copy of *Les Misérables* Ryder had given him the year before. Ryder loved to read, but the heavy classics weren't his forte, which made this unofficial visit that much more ominous.

“Babe? Is something wrong?”

Ryder set the book back on the shelf and turned to Bram. *He looks exhausted. Something had to have happened*, Bram thought to himself as his mate crossed the room and shut the office door behind them.

“Nothing’s wrong. I tried to call you but the front desk said you were out on the field all day. So, I figured I’d come talk to you in person.”

Bram’s neck prickled as warning bells began to go off in his head. “Ryder, we promised to always be straight with each other. What’s going on that is so important you left your office to come talk to me?”

“The Queen asked for us to meet her in her chambers today, so I figured I’d stop by here and we could go over there together.”

Dread filled Bram’s stomach as the myriad implications of those words churned in his gut. “Why does she want to meet with us?”

Before Ryder could even answer, Bram sucked in a gasp of air and locked his gaze on Ryder’s. “Please tell me this has nothing to do with your talk yesterday. I know you said General Grey was taking a group of advisors with him, but you’re not... you’re not one of them. Are you?”

Warmth filled his body when Ryder wrapped his arms around Bram’s waist and pulled them closer together. “No. I’m staying put. She said she wanted to discuss the issues we’ve been facing with the recent influx of refugees. That she wanted both of us there, but especially you because of your role here at the university and because she trusts your insight into all this. Any more than that, and I haven’t a clue.”

A sigh of relief left Bram's body. He could give advice, help counsel someone, hell he could even tutor some of the kids at the shelter as long as it meant he and Ryder were together. For eight years they had been not only in each other's lives, but inseparable. It hadn't always been easy, but they had weathered everything life threw at them. Together.

“When does she want to meet?”

“As soon as we can. Think you can leave for a little while?”

As soon as Ryder broke the embrace to gather his things, Bram instantly wanted to pull him back against his body. He wasn't sure what the meeting was about, but a small voice in the back of his head told him it wasn't good. The Queen had never summoned them before. Ryder? Sure. She had asked for his counsel too many times to count. The both of them? Yeah, that didn't bode well.

He took one last look at his lover, then nodded. “Of course. Let's go.”

As they were leaving Bram's office, Ryder brushed by him and whispered before he opened the office door, “Maybe the meeting will end early and we can head home for some appetizers before dinner.”

The shivers shot straight down to his groin as he imagined the type of appetizers Ryder was referring to. He adjusted himself before shutting the office door behind him, muttering, “Let's get this show on the road then.”

Chapter 5

Ryder

It had taken them less than fifteen minutes to cross the quad of the university where the Queen's chambers were. Her offices were more ostentatious than the Dean's, but since the university was centrally located in town, it seemed like the best place for her to keep her official chambers.

After a brief wait in the antechamber, Ryder and Bram were ushered into a lush high-beamed room filled with dark mahogany bookcases and turn-of-the-century furniture. They might have been living in 2014, but the entire vibe of the room screamed Victorian. Ryder loved the room with its warm burgundy and tan colors and had always loved it when Lady Estrella held small council meetings there. One look at Bram, though, told him they wouldn't be sticking around to enjoy the décor after the meeting.

Truth be told, he was more curious about the meeting than apprehensive. Their regent had always been fair and kind, thus their community had always had a more peaceful and academic lifestyle than those of the other clans. When the shifters had "come out" during the '30s, the transition from living a life in hiding to living freely in everyday society had been rough at first. Non-shifters hadn't known what to think about this new breed of "animal" in their midst and had originally gone on the warpath to eradicate them. Over time and after many peace talks, however, when non-shifters began to realize these "animals" were no less civilized than their own species, a truce was formed. The clans like the Storm Clan and River Clan who wanted to integrate more freely in their societies, tended to live near more heavily populated non-shifter communities. Clans like the Sky Clan had opted to keep to themselves, keeping to a much more sleepy college town way of life securely nestled in the mountains of West Virginia. It wasn't perfect, and there were always small skirmishes between the two species, but it was better than living a life in the closet.

A side door opened, and Lady Estrella walked in. She was not a typical beauty, with her smoky-topaz eyes and wide forehead, but her compassion and intelligence had made her one of the most beautiful people in their clan. He had never been attracted sexually to females, but he felt an attraction to her wit and spirit.

"Ryder. Bram. Thank you for coming at such short notice. I hope it wasn't a problem with your work schedules."

Ryder smiled when he saw Bram bow slightly in their regent's direction. She had dismissed all the formal greetings when she took over as regent from her mother twenty-two years ago, favoring a much more relaxed reign. But Bram, rough and tumble, ruggedly handsome Bram, had always shown deference and respect to those he deemed as worthy. And Lady Estrella definitely fit that bill for him.

“Not a problem at all. We're both at your disposal.”

She smiled at them both, capturing each of their gazes with hers before sitting down behind her massive desk.

Ryder nudged Bram toward the chairs opposite the desk and had to stifle a small chuckle at how stoically silent his partner was. If they had been alone, he would have taken Bram's hand in his and pulled him close for a reassuring kiss. But that would have to wait until after the meeting.

After a brief pause, Lady Estrella smiled and pulled a piece of paper towards her. “Let me get right down to it. After our talk yesterday, I was contacted by one of the shelter's administrators. It seems we have a small issue, and I was hoping you two could help.”

A small issue? Bram tensed beside Ryder, making his urge to reach out and grab his hand even greater.

“Of course. How can we help?”

“Several weeks ago, a refugee from River Clan made his way into the shelter. His was not an easy journey, and I'm afraid he's rather fragile. He's not a kit, but he's young, scared, and shows obvious signs of being traumatized by what he experienced. He also confirmed that the passages out of the war zone were becoming less frequent, hence the slowdown in the numbers we've been receiving lately.”

She paused and pushed the paperwork she'd been looking over toward them. “Sadly, his adjustment here has been... not as smooth as the others.”

Bram leaned forward, never once glancing at the paperwork. “Does he have any family? Friends? Other refugees that he arrived with?”

Ryder's heart surged with love for his mate. He had always had a heart that was larger than anyone Ryder knew. It was what had drawn Ryder to him all those years ago when Ryder had moved to the Sky Clan to attend the university there. When he loved, he loved with all his heart. Luckily for Ryder, that love had been bestowed on him.

“Sadly, he came alone and has not opened up to anyone since he’s been here.”

Giving in to his need to touch his mate, Ryder reached over and laced his fingers with Bram’s. “That can be rough for anyone, regardless of the age.”

Lady Estrella nodded. “It can. And that’s why I’ve called you here today. I want to ask a favor of you.”

Before he could utter a word, Bram replied, “Of course. Anything.”

Again, Ryder’s heart surged with love for this incredible man beside him.

“He needs something more than the shelter can offer him.”

Ryder opened his mouth to speak, but Lady Estrella held her hand up. “Hear me out, Ryder. He’s alone and frightened, and I fear being surrounded by people he doesn’t know or trust is exacerbating his already weak status. He’s not a Tom, or I would have asked Crimson to take him under his wing with the other Toms in training at the academy.”

Not a Tom. Then that meant...

Lady Estrella’s eyes softened as she gazed at their linked hands. “I need a safe place for him to stay for a little while that won’t overwhelm him. Some place that’s quiet but filled with love. Some place where the people he’s surrounded by will understand what it’s like not to be a Tom in a community dominated by them.”

Ryder’s heart felt like it was lodged in his throat. He and Bram had the perfect life. They rarely fought. They enjoyed the same things. They were in perfect simpatico. They had been exclusive since they first began dating eight years ago, and even though some of their friends occasionally took a third, they had never once veered outside of their twosome. What would adding another person in their house, even for just a little while, do to their relationship?

Bram leaned forward and broke the silence. “Why us?”

Lady Estrella gestured to the papers on the desk, waiting until Ryder picked them up, holding them close enough to Bram so they could read over them together.

“Tanner is twenty-four and dropped out of college to work to support him and his mom after his dad died when he was in his freshman year. He had no siblings to help out so he was the main source of income. Tragically, his mother was killed during a street bombing shortly after the Storm Clan declared open

season on the River Clan's shifters. He's alone and frightened. We would like for him to resume his studies here, but emotionally, he's not ready."

She paused and waited until both Ryder and Bram lifted their gazes to hers. "You ask why you. Ryder is one of my most respected and trustworthy advisors, even though he won't take on that role officially."

Ryder felt his face flame with the compliment from his regent.

"And you, Bram, are one of the most caring and beloved faculty members on campus. The other faculty members admire you, but more importantly, your students and former students trust you. Most of all, Tanner needs some place where he can grieve in peace without other people judging him. I will understand if it's too much to ask, but I'd like for you to at least meet him before you make your final decision."

Ryder shifted his gaze over to Bram, his mind swirling in confusion. His gaze sent the unspoken question, "*Can we do this? Do you want to do this?*"

Bram's silent nod was all the confirmation he needed. Lady Estrella got up from her desk and walked over to the same side door she had entered. A moment later she reentered the room, followed by a striking young man.

His skin was pale, almost porcelain in color, with a mane of dark, shoulder-length hair that swept over his right eye. His clothes were decidedly not from their area. In fact, he looked as if he had just left an alternative music concert rather than a refugee shelter. But when Ryder's gaze raked over him more closely as he huddled close to the doorway, he could see the refugee hiding inside Tanner. His emerald-green eyes held hidden horrors. The slight tremble of his hand as he wrapped his arms around his waist screamed his insecurities louder than anything verbal could have.

"Tanner? This is Bram and Ryder."

Ryder's chest constricted when a barely audible "Hey" was uttered from Tanner's lips. War had many casualties, not just those who lost their lives.

"Nice to meet you Tanner. Lady Estrella? Could Ryder and I have a moment alone?"

"Of course. Take your time."

Ryder's head whipped around to Bram. Just as quickly as they had entered the room, Lady Estrella and Tanner left.

"Bram—"

“Ryder. I love you. And you know how much I love our life. But I think we should do this. He’s in pain and he’s alone. And heaven knows we have the space.”

Ryder nodded. All that was true, but another person in their house? Another person who obviously needed so much more than just a roof over his head?

“We can do this. I know we can. It’s just that... when I saw him, all I could think about is what if that had been one of us? Losing everything we have with no one to look out for us.”

He paused and stood up, reaching for Ryder’s hand to pull him up against his body, and embraced Ryder. “We can do this.”

Ryder was helpless against Bram when he was like this. Truth be told, it was one of the reasons he had fallen in love with him. Bram had a heart that was bigger than anyone else he knew. For this reason alone, he felt luckier than anyone else alive.

With a simple nod of his head and a gentle kiss on Bram’s lips, he smiled then pulled away to turn his attention to the closed side door.

“Lady Estrella?”

Chapter 6

Tanner

As he looked around his new “home”, Tanner felt like a loser. The small cabin was nice with its wood floors and simple wooden furniture, but it screamed cozy. It screamed domestic. It screamed family. Pathetically, he fit in with none of those descriptions.

Bram and Ryder, his new keepers, had met him back at the shelter so he could gather up his few meager belongings and then had driven him back here. To their home. During the entire car ride, he had wanted to scream at the farce of it all. Lady Estrella had assured him his nightmares and constant disruption in the other refugees’ lives had nothing to do with the new arrangement. She claimed it was a better fit for him. She claimed the two men were wonderful and would look after him while he got his feet wet in their community. She claimed he would be happy there. Instead of replying outwardly, he had raged and shouted inside the confines of his own fucked-up head that her claims were just a nice way of saying, “You’re simply too fucked-up to be at the shelter, Tanner, and so we’ve found a nice place to hide you away for a while so you don’t freak out the other nice people staying there.”

“And this will be your room.” Tanner shifted his attention from his own dark thoughts to the man standing beside him. Ryder was taller than he was, hell they both were, but Bram’s frame was leaner and more wiry than his mate’s. He had the faint trace of scruff on his jaw with a gentleness about his eyes. But there was also a shrewdness there that indicated he was taking in everything Tanner did. And wasn’t that lovely to be under a microscope in a house where he felt every inch the interloper?

“Thanks.” That was all Tanner could muster. What did they expect him to say? Did they want him to rush into their arms and wax poetically about how lucky he was they were taking pity on him and giving him room and board? Not going to happen.

“We’re both early risers, so we’ll try not to wake you when we get up to go to work. I have some days I can fiddle with for some time off, but otherwise, we want you to make yourself comfortable. There’s food in the fridge if you get hungry and a field behind the house with a spectacular view of the mountains.”

Tanner shifted his gaze to Bram. He was taller than Ryder and broader with more muscle on him. He had explained on the car ride over that he worked as a

physics professor at the university, but he looked like he belonged on the football field more than he belonged in a classroom explaining the laws of gravity and shit.

“Thanks.” Again. What was he supposed to say? *Oh, a mountain view just for me to enjoy? Shucks. You shouldn't have.*

“We'll give you some time to get settled, then we'll have dinner. I'm sorry that we only have leftovers tonight. Bram makes a mean pot of spaghetti, so it's still a treat, but maybe we'll go out for something tomorrow night.”

“Yeah.” Before he could hear another syllable of their pity, Tanner entered the room and closed the door. He knew he was being a dick, but right now he really didn't give a shit. Homeless in a home where he felt like an outsider. It was obvious the two men were a couple. He didn't need his gaydar to confirm that for him. Two grown single men living together who stole shared glances to silently communicate with each other? Yeah. Even the faultiest of gaydars would have picked up on that one.

Which begged the question—is that why he was here? Because he was gay? Because the only place for a fucked-up, screaming in the middle of the night gay guy was a cabin with two other gay guys and nothing but the mountains to hear his screams?

He sighed and looked out the lone window in the room. Mountains. He shivered just looking at them, even though it was spring and the room wasn't chilly. He knew he should change into something heavier, something to keep the mountain air from penetrating deep into his skin during the crisp morning hours and downright brutally cold nights. But again, he couldn't part with the one thing that made him a member of the River Clan.

He laughed bitterly at that thought. Within a month, there would be no more River Clan. Not if the Storm Clan had anything to say about it. A dispute between the two clans had turned into an all-out war, complete with an agenda to ethnically cleanse the entire South of all River shifters. And what would that give them? Bragging rights? More land to spread their own clan out on? The satisfaction of wiping another group out of existence?

The more Tanner thought about it all, the more pissed off he became. The four walls of the room began to close in around him, choking him of the ability to breathe normally. Without a second thought, he threw open the door and all but ran for the front door.

“Tanner? Where are you—”

The last thing Tanner heard before he leaped off the front porch and started running was the deep rumble of Bram's voice. "Leave him. He needs space."

He sprinted around the house to the field Bram and Ryder had so lovingly told him about and made his way to the closest tree. His clothes were shed in no time and soon he was running at full speed, his body shifting into his feline form without ever breaking his stride. This was his saving grace. This was the form he could lose himself in while his mind raged and screamed against the images that held him hostage. As the cabin fell further and further behind him, a feral cry escaped Tanner's lips as he pushed his limbs even harder to put as much distance between himself and his new "home" as he could.

Chapter 7

Bram

The bloodcurdling cry filled the house and had Bram up and running before he could even form a coherent thought. When he reached the closed door, he waited only a second before the screaming started up again, making his decision to enter the room easier.

With only the moonlight filtering through the window, Bram could see Tanner's body thrashing about in his bed, the covers twisting over and around his limbs. Leave or go? Tanner had only been here a few days and most of those were spent with either Bram and Ryder at work or Tanner outside on his own, so he really didn't feel they had enough of a relationship between them yet to go to him. But a tormented soul was never a good thing to leave alone.

Throwing caution to the wind, he quickly strode into the room and sat down on the edge of the bed, his hand trying to find a place to touch that wasn't in the midst of the flurry of movement.

"Tanner. Hey. Tanner. It's okay. It's only a dream. You're safe. It's only a dream."

The thrashing slowed down as Bram watched the haze of sleep fall away. When he opened his eyes, Tanner recoiled from Bram's touch, his back flat against the headboard of the bed.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. You were having a bad dream."

Bram wanted to smack himself. As if Tanner didn't know he was having a nightmare. Fucking hell. If this was any indication of what his dreams were like, his experience over the past year in Callatown must have been hell.

Tanner kept his eyes down and scooted further away, but Bram could see his body still trembling. Stay or leave? Even though he wanted to offer what little comfort he could, it had to be Tanner's decision to bridge the gap between them and let down his guard enough to trust they were only here to help.

"I know you don't know us or probably even want me in here, but we're just down the hall."

He was halfway across the room when a small voice carried over his shoulder. "Can you... Shit. The nightmares suck ass. Can you stay... for just a minute until I can get my fucking heart to stop beating out of my chest?"

The sigh that left Bram's lips was one of relief. He turned and nodded, making his way back to the bed as casually as he could. It was hard enough to ask for help from people you trusted, but to ask someone you've just met to help you through the sick stuff Tanner had gone through took balls of steel.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his back against the headboard next to Tanner's. "I won't push, but if you ever want to talk about it, we're here."

The small nod in the darkness tugged at his heart as they sat there, side by side, in silence. Thirty minutes must have gone by before Tanner's body calmed enough for him to shift down in the bed. Bram thought about getting up to allow him some peace alone, but then Tanner turned, his face and body mere inches from Bram's body.

Instinctively, he reached out his hand and ran it gently over Tanner's hair. The answering sigh he heard conveyed more to Bram than anything Tanner could have verbalized. With gentle caresses, he ran his hand through Tanner's thick black hair, grateful the first hurdle between them had finally been crossed.

When he heard a sound by the door, he looked up and into the eyes of Ryder standing in the doorway. It was hard to make out his expression, but he made no sound or any movement to enter the room. He just stood there and watched as Bram raked his fingers through Tanner's hair over and over.

Once Tanner's breaths had evened out and his body was finally still beside Bram, he carefully eased off the bed and met his lover at the door. Without a word spoken between them, Bram took Ryder's hand in his own and led him back to their bedroom. He left the door cracked in case Tanner had another nightmare, but once they made their way to their bed, Bram's mouth was on his lover's.

He'd never felt the kind of loneliness and ache that Tanner was obviously feeling, and he attributed that not only to his life with the peaceful Sky Clan but also to his life with Ryder. Need poured from him as he fused their mouths together, his tongue gliding over Ryder's lips as he sought entrance.

An answering moan was all it took for Bram to slide inside Ryder's mouth. His hands gripped Ryder's hips and guided him back against the bed, carefully laying him down on the mattress as Bram knelt over him. Ryder's head shot back, breaking the kiss. When Bram arched his hips forward, the friction of their cocks together drove his need higher.

He leaned forward again and trailed kisses along Ryder's jaw to his neck. At each interval, he paused to murmur to his lover. "I love you. More than you'll ever know, I love you."

Ryder writhed under him as their bodies rocked against each other. A shiver ran down Bram's spine when he felt Ryder's hands slip under his shirt and tug at it. Hovering over Ryder, Bram took his hands off Ryder's feverishly hot skin and pulled his shirt over his head. Next came Ryder's shirt, and soon both men had divested themselves of their boxer shorts. Ryder shifted higher on the bed, pulling Bram back down over him.

As Bram looked down at him, he swallowed hard at how incredibly lucky he was. Ryder was intelligent, caring, handsome, and his. He couldn't imagine losing him to some war-crazy clan bent on destroying those they deemed unfit. An image of Ryder's body bloody and twisted in some macabre pose after being destroyed for simply being different flashed in his mind. His stomach roiled just thinking about it. A gentle hand on his cheek halted the horrifying images.

"Be here with me."

Bram shook the images from his head and nodded, slanting his mouth over Ryder's again just as the words "I love you" left Ryder's lips.

He shifted his weight and reached into their bedside table, setting the small bottle of lube he withdrew next to them on the bed. With a hungry kiss, Bram lowered himself completely on top of Ryder, running his hands possessively over his body. Pouring every ounce of emotion he could into that kiss, he began to arch his hips forward. As their cocks slid along each other, Ryder's pants for breath matched his own. Hands sought any inch of free skin they could find as they pulled and tugged at each other in their frantic grinding.

When Bram felt Ryder arch up higher, he slipped his hand between them, his fingers skimming over Ryder's hard length and down to his balls. Nothing existed in this moment except the two of them. Their problems and the problems of the world would wait for them. Right now, it was just the two of them losing themselves in the comfort and security of each other's bodies.

Ryder writhed under him as Bram's fingers moved lower, his fingers gently pressing against the hole there. Needing more room, he rose and knelt between Ryder's legs. Wasting no more time, he poured some lube into his palm, then drizzled some over the cock that was lying heavy and thick against Ryder's abs. There were no words for how much he loved the man underneath him right now. No words that could express how much he loved him, but more so, how much he needed him. Feeling his heart expand even more, he slammed his mouth over Ryder's again, palming and lubing his erection between them. Time

slowed as they finally broke the kiss, both breathing hard and out of breath as Bram ran his slickened palm over Ryder's length. Bram knelt there, watching his lover arch and writhe under him while he stroked his cock.

"Please, Bram. I need more of you tonight. I need to feel you moving inside me."

The urgent plea took Bram's breath away and without another thought, his hand was on the lube bottle again. His slick fingers were pushing, stretching, twisting inside Ryder's tight hole. When Ryder's body began to shake under him, Bram slid the fingers out and guided his cock to Ryder's entrance, slowly pushing inside him. Even though they had a healthy and active sex life, the tightness he felt whenever he first entered Ryder never failed to take his breath away. Once he was fully seated inside Ryder's body, Bram began the torturous dance they both loved so much. A slow slide and pull of his body as his cock entered and withdrew from Ryder's warm channel. Over and over again he pumped his hips until he felt the sweat drip down from his temple to his jaw.

When he saw Ryder's hand slip between him and over his cock, Bram knew he wouldn't last much longer. They locked gazes and Ryder clenched around Bram's cock, the pressure and friction causing him to cry out in pleasure, and he slammed his hips back down in response. With an almost guttural cry, Ryder tensed then shuddered under Bram, a warm wetness pooling between them. The sight of Ryder losing it under him sent him over the edge, his cock pulsing as he threw his head back and felt his orgasm rip through him. With his body still trembling with the aftershocks of his release, he collapsed on top of Ryder, his muscles loose and relaxed for the first time in days.

They lay there for a few minutes in the darkness, their labored breathing the only sound in the room. A creak of a floorboard in the hallway outside their room caught Bram's attention, but when he turned and strained to hear more, his ears were met with silence.

He turned back to Ryder, whose eyes were still closed, and kissed him softly. He felt rather than saw the smile that spread across his lover's face. When he pulled out of Ryder's body, the man he fell in love with all those years ago beamed back at him.

"That, was nice."

Bram chuckled and nipped at Ryder's lower lip. "Just nice?"

Ryder brought his hand once again up to Bram's cheek and nodded. "Very nice."

Reluctantly, Bram pulled back and shuffled off the bed to get a towel from the bathroom. Once they were clean and clothed again, Bram pulled Ryder against him and kissed his temple. “All I could think about while I was in there was how far gone I’d be if I lost you the way Tanner has lost the people he loved.”

Ryder tried to shush him, but he pulled back so he could look Ryder in the eyes. “No, I’m serious. I can’t imagine ever losing you. And to have it be in some senseless war? I’d be batshit crazy by the end of the week.”

With a gentle kiss placed over Bram’s heart, Ryder smiled sadly. “So would I.”

As soon as Ryder settled back against Bram’s side, Bram ran his fingers through Ryder’s hair and thought back to being in Tanner’s room. “He just needs someone, Ryder. He just needs someone to understand him and actually be there when he wakes up the next day.”

Bram felt Ryder’s sigh fan across his skin. “I know Bram. I know.”

Chapter 8

Tanner

Tanner stood with his back pressed against the door, his heart hammering in his chest. *Holy fuck*. That was one of the hottest things he'd ever seen. He'd had his own experiences with sex, and he'd watched porn. Who hadn't? But the connection. The love. The passion. Yeah, that's what had made him stand at the door, unable to make his feet move and walk back to his room.

His one and only serious relationship was during his freshman year of college. There was a lot of sex, but at the end of the day, both he and Haven just hadn't had enough between them to keep it going once he had quit school and gone home to help his mom out. After that, his few encounters with sex were hasty one-night stands that were good at the time, but left him feeling empty once it was over.

He finally made his way over to his bed and sat down, his heart still pounding. Once his breathing and body had finally calmed down enough for him to relax, he settled deeper under the covers, still awake but more in control of himself. Most times he hated it when people tried to comfort him, but Bram's presence had been soothing, allowing him, for even a brief amount of time, to lean on someone else while he felt like his world was falling apart.

Once he'd calmed down from the nightmare, he'd tried to go to sleep. The shift of the bed had told him Bram was leaving, but the words Tanner wanted to say were lodged in his throat. Losing everyone he loved made it all but impossible for him to say those two simple words, "thank you," for fear of building one more connection that would surely be stripped from him in the end. But Bram and Ryder had been nothing but caring since Tanner had arrived and it seemed ungrateful to let Bram's presence in his room tonight slide by without a second thought.

After a minute of debating it, Tanner had slipped out of bed and made his way down the hallway to Bram and Ryder's room. With his hand poised to knock, he had heard the first moan carry through the crack in the door. His entire body had frozen as his brain registered what kind of moan it was. Through the small opening, Tanner had watched as the two men collided with each other, need and lust rolling off them in powerful waves. Peppered in between the moans were murmurs of love and need, all the things Tanner had

been missing so desperately in his life since his father had passed away and his life became consumed with work, and later, the war.

Unable to move, Tanner had stood at the door and watched as they finally climaxed in each other's arms, his own body reacting to the scene as all his blood traveled south. When the silence in the room stretched for several minutes, Tanner had slowly backed away, internally cursing the creaky floorboard under his feet as he made his way back down the hallway to his own room.

Even now, his mind still reeled with the images and sounds he'd seen, his erection tenting the sleep pants he was in. If he were alone, he might have taken the edge off with a quick self-love session, but even the thought of being alone to take care of his needs made his hard-on begin to deflate.

The connection Bram and Ryder shared, the passion and need, that's what Tanner wanted. He'd been alone for so long now that having someone to care about was as foreign as it was seemingly unattainable. Yes Finn had been his best friend, but Tanner wanted more. He wanted to find that easy place in a relationship where no words were needed, where just a simple glance spoke volumes.

As soon as those thoughts entered his head, they left and were replaced by an aching bitterness in his gut. "Fuck this."

He didn't need anyone to care about him, and he didn't need the extra baggage of worrying about someone else right now. He had shit to sort out and once it was, he'd be out of this house and away from scenes like he'd just witnessed. Before he knew what he was doing, he'd stripped his clothes off and opened the solitary window in his room. The moment his feet touched the cold, damp grass he took off running.

With the adrenaline flowing freely in his system again, his body shifted into the form he felt most comfortable with these days. While he was in his feline form, the world and all of its fucked-up problems faded away. Maybe he'd stay like this. He'd heard rumors of clans further west who rarely ever shifted to their human forms, instead, opting to live as the felines they were.

As his mind raged and his thoughts screamed their pain, he pushed his paws harder against the ground, putting as much distance as he could between the two men and himself.

The next two weeks passed the same way the first few days had. Tanner stayed in bed until he heard the telltale snick of the lock turning in the front door, and then he was out the door and roaming the land behind the cabin until dusk had settled across the mountains. He ate in silence in the empty house or in the middle of the night, once Bram and Ryder had gone to bed. The weekends presented him another problem with both men being home, but he had handled that by shifting and roaming the mountainside behind their cabin, leaving early in the morning and returning well after darkness fell.

The only deviation from this routine was during the few late night hours when he passed out from exhaustion. The nightmares came relentlessly, often resulting in him screaming and thrashing about like a preschooler. Those were the only times he permitted contact with Bram and Ryder. Against his better judgment that it was better to be alone than to allow another person into his life and heart, it was those moments when his heart was pounding and his mind was racing that he craved the comfort of another person. They alternated coming into his room, probably both exhausted from getting up with him in the middle of the night, but neither one pushed him to talk. Neither one had pushed him to do much of anything, basically giving him free rein of the house when they weren't there and allowing for his frequent disappearances without an inquisition of where he'd been or what he had been doing. He knew this situation was becoming dangerous, however, because a part of him more than craved those late night strokes of his hair, back, and arms. He had promised himself not to get involved with anyone, knowing all too well the sting of loss when, purposely or by fate's sick sense of humor, they left him forever. But the touches, the soft pets, the tenderness both men had shown him struck him deep in his core. The fact they were a happily committed couple made it all that much more painful when they left his room after he had calmed down. He knew they left to wrap themselves in each other's arms, while he remained in his room, alone.

This had been the pattern of behavior they had kept up, until Saturday arrived. Keeping his eyes still closed, he heard the rain as it pattered against the roof above him, almost lulling him back to sleep. Tanner lay in bed waiting for the sound of feet shuffling and doors closing, but they never came. When he finally heard voices carry under his doorframe, he smacked himself in the head with his hand, the dawning realization it was the weekend finally hitting him.

“Fuck.”

He turned his head toward the window, his gut churning with dread. He could hop through it now and spend the day on the mountain. Even though he'd

searched and hunted the area surrounding them, there were still miles of undiscovered land he could lose himself in to avoid coming face to face with Bram and Ryder.

The rain, however, had a different agenda for him. He had no real aversion to being out in the wet, but even in his feline form, he was smaller than average and he knew the cold would eventually work its way into his bones, making the hours almost unbearable.

“Fuck...”

Stay or run? A little voice inside Tanner’s head told him to suck up the frigid elements and get the hell out of the house, but an equally small and quiet voice told him he was not only being an ass, but a coward for running from two men who had yet to mistreat him. Tanner was a lot of things—fucked-up and alone came to mind—but he wasn’t a coward.

Steeling his resolve, he threw off the covers and pulled on the outfit he’d arrived to the Sky Clan in. With a final grit of his teeth, he opened the door and instantly began salivating. The smell of bacon and eggs assaulted him, making his stomach growl in response. During his self-imposed isolation, Tanner hadn’t once sat down to a hot meal with Bram and Ryder. He sucked at cooking, so cold sandwiches and things he could easily scarf down with very little thought as to their preparation had been the sole extent of his meals this week. The mouth-watering smells that were now filling his senses were too much for him to ignore as he felt his body being pulled toward the kitchen.

Two sets of eyes turned to greet him when he crossed the threshold. One set a deep shade of grey, the other an almost blinding golden hue.

“Hungry?”

Tanner nodded at Ryder, but found himself rooted to his spot in the doorway. He wanted to scream, “*Why in the fuck are you being so nice to me?*” but he kept his lips tightly shut.

Bram scooped out a heaping portion of food on each plate before handing one to Ryder, bringing the other two to the table himself.

“Coffee? Juice?”

“Cof—” Tanner cleared the held-back rant from his throat and slowly moved over to the counter. “I’ll get some coffee. Thanks.”

As he reached for a clean mug, he heard the scraping of chairs on the floor as the two men sat at the table. Maybe he could claim he wasn’t feeling well.

Maybe that would be enough of an excuse to carry his plate back to his room so he could eat in silence. *Get a fucking grip. You're not some pathetic loser who has to hide in a room all day. Eat and then you can go have your pity party.*

He filled his mug with coffee and joined Bram and Ryder at the table, almost inhaling his food at once, moaning at the first hot meal he'd had in two weeks. His cheeks warmed when he heard a chuckle next to him, but kept his attention focused on his plate.

“So whatever happened with that experiment Drake wanted you to help with?”

“We're having a meeting about it on Monday. I think...”

Tanner tuned them out while he finished his breakfast. When he had scraped his plate clean, he was tempted to ask for seconds, but that would mean interrupting the conversation still going on at the table and he didn't want to miss his opportunity to make a clean getaway before they turned their focus back on him.

Without losing another minute, his plate and mug were deposited in the sink and he was halfway across the room before he stopped, his eyes still focused forward. “Thanks for the breakfast. I'll be in my room if you need me.”

Tanner didn't wait for them to answer. He knew he was being chickenshit, but being around two people so obviously in love made it next to impossible for him to be in the same room with them.

When he got to his room, he stripped his clothes off to his boxers and crawled back into bed. The sheets felt cold against his skin as he scooted deep under them. As he closed his eyes, images of Bram and Ryder in bed together flashed through his mind. They'd been nothing but nice to him and a part of him yearned to be near that kind of love. But it wasn't for him. None of it was for him.

Chapter 9

Ryder

Ryder watched Tanner leave the kitchen and sighed. “Do you think we should try to talk to him? It’s been what, two weeks?”

Bram’s hand felt warm and reassuring when he placed it on top of Ryder’s. “I think he just needs some time to sort it all out. He’ll talk when he’s ready.”

“But—”

Bram’s deep grey eyes locked on his, the squeeze of his hand stopping Ryder midthought. “If his nightmares are any indication of what he’s seen, he just needs time.”

Ryder’s heart hurt for the young man, but deep inside he knew his partner was right. They’d heard Tanner thrashing in his sleep several times, evidence that first nightmare wasn’t a one-time ordeal, but none of them had been as bad as that first one. They had taken turns going to Tanner’s room to wake him up and comfort him, but Tanner never opened up and talked about the terrible dreams that plagued him. They would stay until he was calmed down enough to go back to sleep, crawling back in bed with each other to find their own comfort in each other’s arms, each one thankful for the man lying beside him. But each morning, the urge grew for him to go and comfort, help, shit... do anything that seemed more productive than just waking him up from his nightmare.

Before Tanner ever came to live with them, he thought he’d feel some form of jealousy or anger if he ever saw his mate with another man in a bed in the middle of the night. But when he watched Bram with Tanner that first night, his heart had swelled from not only pride in his mate, but love for the broken man in that room. The contented sighs that carried to him at the doorway whenever Bram ran his fingers through Tanner’s hair or down his back pierced him. How alone did someone have to be for them to be that starved for touch?

He leaned in his chair to brush his lips across Bram’s temple and nodded. “Since it’s raining, how about you get a movie queued up while I clean up the kitchen?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Bram got up from the table and hovered in the doorway. “And who knows? Maybe a movie day is exactly what Tanner needs to pull him out of that room and into the land of the living again.”

Ryder's heart clenched and he thought, *With any luck.*

Two hours later, the battle between the orcs and the elves was interrupted by bloodcurdling screams. At first, Ryder thought it was just another one of the actors on the screen, until Bram's finger hit the mute button on the remote control and the screams continued.

Together, they flew off the sofa and tore down the hallway to Tanner's room. Ryder entered first, the sight before him making his blood run cold. Tanner thrashed in his bed, his almost naked body drenched in sweat. Ryder momentarily froze as Tanner's moans and guttural cries hit him like a punch in the gut. But when he didn't wake up, he crossed the room without even thinking and sat on the bed.

"Tanner. Tanner! It's just a dream. Wake up, buddy. It's just a dream."

When Tanner's eyes flew open, Ryder took in a breath at the depth of desperation that shone in them. With careful movements, he lifted his hand and brushed back Tanner's hair from his sweaty brow, leaving it there as Tanner trembled under his palm. There was a momentary flash of embarrassment probably from both the dream and his current state of undress, then he closed his eyes as if trying to hide from his audience.

Ryder heard then saw Bram move closer to the bed, sitting down on the opposite side. They locked gazes for a brief moment, each conveying to the other how much it broke their hearts to see anyone in this much pain. A silent understanding passed between them as they both moved to sit at the head of the bed, their hands in a synchronized dance of movement through Tanner's hair.

After what felt like an eternity, Tanner's soft, broken voice cut through the silence. "I watched both of them die." He chuckled darkly, then cleared his throat, his voice still laden with sadness but stronger. "Hell, I watched a lot of people die, but I watched both of them die right before my eyes."

Ryder's heart broke when the words finally registered. Thankfully, Bram's voice worked better than his, and his heart surged with love for both of these men when he heard his lover ask, "Wanna talk about it? You don't have to, but we're here if you want to."

A long moment passed—so long that Ryder thought Tanner was going to clam up again and shut them out. He felt a small tremor roll through Tanner's body, then let his breath out in relief when Tanner began to talk.

“When the war first began, my mom thought we could still live life normally. She used to tell me that if we changed how we lived, then the Storm Clan would have already won. It was just her and me, so I went into town with her while she shopped. She only had one more errand, for fuck’s sake. It was to buy some fucking thread so she could fix one of my shirts, so I told her I’d go check across the street at the fishmonger to see what kind of specials he had that we could afford while she got what she needed. I had barely made it halfway across the road when the explosion went off. Dust and debris went flying. But that wasn’t the worst part.”

Tears shone in Tanner’s eyes as he paused and swallowed hard. “No, the worst part was what came after the explosion. Over the sound of the fire and crackling glass, were screams. Shrieks and moans that carried out of the shop and down the street. The blast was so strong it knocked me off my feet and against the window display of the fishmonger’s shop. I ran at top speed to get to the building but the smoke and fire were simply too much. Hours later, the fire department said the few bodies that weren’t completely destroyed from the blast were in too bad of shape for on-site identifications. And even though I knew she hadn’t survived, I had to wait days for the final confirmation that she was dead. News reports said Storm Clan rebels had claimed responsibility for the bomb, vowing to increase their quest to purge the River District of all remaining River Clan shifters.”

Ryder’s hand had stilled in Tanner’s hair, his stomach churning as he thought about Tanner’s mom. What kind of cruel world did they live in where this kind of thing was deemed acceptable? To his credit, Bram’s hand never once stopped moving. Ryder looked down at Tanner and never felt as helpless as he did at that very moment. His body was still trembling and his eyes were closed, but tears had begun to fall down his face and on the sheets under him.

“Then there was Finn. We were like brothers, growing up together all throughout school. He’d already lost his parents to a ‘home invasion from unknown assailants’ the year before the war broke out, so he moved in with me since neither of us wanted to be alone. Then Mom died and we were really alone. We kept to ourselves and barely went out except to get food or supplies we needed. It sucked, but at least we were alive. Then Finn saw the sign for a passage. We had missed the other opportunities, and knew if we missed that one, we’d be as good as dead by the end of the month.”

Tanner paused, the tears flowing freely. When he began again, his voice was still broken but there was no anger to it now. “We were almost to the safe

house. Only one turn to go and we would have made it free and clear. Finn had always kicked my ass in sports at school and was easily a hundred feet ahead of me when he turned onto the main street. There were the normal spotlights out to catch the stupid fucks like us who were trying to make a break for it, but they hadn't found us yet. Until he rounded the corner. I heard the shots before I saw them. They had to have had a patrol guarding possible locations for the safe houses. Either way, the moment he turned the corner, they saw him. The bullets ripped through his body as they gunned him down in the middle of the street."

He turned to Bram, his eyes sad and pleading. "I wanted to go to him. I wanted to be there for his last moments, but I couldn't. If I had, I knew they would have shot me too. So I took a different street and kept running."

Tanner's sob finally took over as he turned and curled his body closer to Bram. "I ran until I reached the safe house. But I should have been there. For both of them, I should have been there."

"Shhh..." Bram shifted his body closer and enveloped Tanner in his strong arms with only the thin top sheet separating them. Ryder watched as Bram murmured over and over about how he couldn't save either one of them, but he could live for them. Throughout it all, Tanner's body shook violently as the sobs racked his body. Seeing them together like this should have made Ryder jealous. It should have had him storming out of the room to call the Queen to find somewhere else for Tanner to go. Instead, it tugged at his heart and made him realize that he wanted Tanner there. It felt right and even more, it felt natural. He would never forsake Bram, but he also couldn't deny that Tanner had found a place in his heart that he wasn't sure what to do about.

Ryder mimicked Bram's position, and together they held the anguished man between them, their hands finding each other's over his body as they gave him the only thing they could—their comfort.

Chapter 10

Bram

Bram's shoulder was killing him, but he refused to move his arm from under Tanner's body. It had taken almost half an hour for Tanner to get the last of his emotions out and fall back asleep, his body falling limp between him and Ryder.

He knew from the open window they often saw when they went to check on him during the stillness of the night that Tanner had been shifting and running at night to escape his demons. And from the look of him right now, he had been running on little or no sleep for days. It made sense, now that Tanner had allowed them inside his nightmares. Why would someone ever go to sleep if all they saw was the death of your loved ones playing on a loop with no way to stop it?

As Tanner slept, Bram and Ryder had kept their gazes locked on each other. Bram knew a piece of his heart had opened up during Tanner's first night in the house when he'd soothed him after his nightmare. Ryder was his one true love and Bram would never do anything to wreck what they had, but there was something about Tanner that had pierced his heart and wouldn't let go.

A subtle shift caused Bram's eyes to turn back to Tanner. His breathing was still calm, but a flicker of his eyelids told Bram he was slowly coming back to them. Bram knew the second the realization hit Tanner that he was sandwiched between him and Ryder. He acted on instinct and released Ryder's hand, running it softly down Tanner's hair and shoulders. As if on cue, Ryder did the same thing, both of them adding whatever comfort they could to lessen Tanner's pain.

When those brilliant green eyes opened and locked on Bram's, he sucked in a breath at the need and emotion he saw there. Tentatively, Tanner lifted his hand and placed it on Bram's chest, the thin T-shirt barely any barrier at all from the warmth radiating through the material, as he buried his head in Bram's neck. He heard Ryder's breath hitch, which caused Tanner to freeze. Fearing he would see anger and disapproval in his lover's eyes, Bram's heart thudded in his chest as he lifted his gaze to Ryder's. In those beautiful golden eyes, he saw only love and understanding. They'd have to have a serious talk about this once they were alone, but for now, Ryder's emotions reflected Bram's. They might

not have been seeking a third for their relationship, but that third had found them just the same.

Breaking his eye contact with Ryder, Bram shifted down further on the bed so he could focus his attention on Tanner. With more pressure, he ran his hand down Tanner's shoulder and side, his fingers skating over the pale flesh. Goose bumps followed the trail of his hand as it made a circuit up and down Tanner's body. Bram bit back a moan when Tanner's hand curled inward against his chest, the gentle scrape of fingernails sending a jolt of need through his body.

Not wanting to push Tanner too much, too soon, he slowly moved his hand to Tanner's chest, mimicking Tanner's movement over his smooth chest. He wasn't stocky and defined like Ryder was with his scruff and dusting of hair down his chest and abs; instead Tanner was lean with very little body hair. All angles and bones with just enough muscle underneath to hint at the subtle strength he possessed. With a flick of his finger, Bram lightly scraped his fingernail over the taut bud of Tanner's nipple. Bram felt Tanner's hiss against his neck, the warm air making him shiver with need.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ryder's hand run over Tanner's back, the movement slow and steady and sensuous. Bram felt Tanner arch into that touch at the same moment he felt soft lips on his collarbone. The soft pressure was replaced with a gentle graze of teeth, causing Bram's cock to strain inside his shorts as it hardened. At the rate his heart was hammering in his chest, he knew that this was going to get out of hand quickly. Not that he didn't want it to; for the first time since he and Ryder became lovers, he yearned to feel the weight of another person in their bed. The feeling wasn't one of needing to replace Ryder, but more of the added heat and feel of someone else with them.

Bram pulled away from Tanner's lips until he could see the younger man's face. "We don't have to do anything you're not ready for. This... this isn't something we do. I mean, we've never taken a third before."

He paused and looked over Tanner's shoulder to Ryder, expecting to see some kind of recrimination in those piercing golden eyes. Instead he saw nothing but understanding and need. Bram wasn't alone in his feelings for Tanner, and together, always together, they would navigate this experience of desiring someone new.

Bram's eyes met Tanner's again, hoping to soften the expression in them before he spoke. "You'll always be welcome to stay here, with or without," he paused to wave a hand between all of them, "this."

Tanner's haunted green eyes still held the insecurity of someone who had loved and lost too much in life, but they also held a burning need that he couldn't, wouldn't, hide. "I don't want you to go." He shifted then and looked over his shoulder at Ryder behind him. "Either of you."

The heat that shot through Bram's body made him question the sanity of doing this, but when his gaze met Ryder's over Tanner's body, he knew with every fiber of his being they had already crossed that line and were now at the point of no return. Ryder was in this every bit as much as he was, the desire burning in his eyes confirming that.

Shutting off the part of his brain that tried to list all the reasons he shouldn't be doing this, Bram dug his fingers into Tanner's hip and simply let himself feel. The small moan that came from Tanner's lips brushed over his chest caused him to arch his hips forward, pulling Tanner closer to his body. Out of the corner of his eye, Bram saw Ryder lean forward, his lips gently grazing Tanner's shoulder blades. The act was so gentle, and yet so erotic, he felt his semi-erect cock lengthen inside his shorts. Together, he and Ryder moved their hands over Tanner's exposed skin. Each one sliding and caressing as the young man trembled between them.

When Tanner's hand slid lower down Bram's chest, Bram sucked in a breath as he felt long, thin fingers slip under the thin T-shirt. He hadn't been touched like this by anyone else but Ryder since they met eight years ago. To know that Ryder was here in this bed with him and Tanner and just as turned on as he was made the feeling that much more intense.

Shifting, Bram's hand left Tanner's body as he leaned back and pulled the shirt over his head. The material had barely hit the floor before Tanner's mouth moved over his chest. He closed his eyes as the gentle glide of lips across his feverishly warm skin moved to one of his nipples. Soon all Bram could focus on was the sharp graze of teeth over his taut bud, followed by a gentle lap of a tongue to smooth the pain away. Tanner's hands ran down the length of his abs as his mouth found Bram's other nipple, causing Bram to arch closer to that warm wet mouth.

He felt the bed dip but his eyes wouldn't open yet, the feel of Tanner's mouth on his body short-circuiting any of his brain cells from working at the moment. When he heard footsteps across the room, his eyes popped open in an instant. Over Tanner's shoulder, Bram could see Ryder walking down the hall. *Shit! I misread this entire thing and now I've gone and fucked it all up. Why in the hell had I even entertained the idea that this would work?*

Tanner stilled and looked at him with those hungry green eyes, aware that something had gone wrong. “Bram?” The absence of Ryder’s body behind him must have registered because his eyes became wide as saucers as he scooted away from him.

“Fuck! Bram... goddammit. I’m so fucking sorry.”

He turned and was trying to scramble off the bed when he stilled, his gaze focused on the door. Bram lifted his head to the doorway and sucked in a breath of relief. There, his shirt off and his shorts tenting what was obviously *not* an aversion to what they had just been doing, was Ryder. Bram searched his face for any kind of anger or sadness, but he only found the same burning desire in Ryder’s eyes that he had seen a moment ago in Tanner’s.

Before he could say anything, Ryder had crossed the room, set something on the bedside table and crawled back into bed. Tanner lifted his gaze to Ryder, his eyes still wide with worry, and asked in a trembling voice, “Ryder? Fuck... I’m so sorry—”

Bram’s heart expanded with love as he saw Ryder lower his head and kiss Tanner lightly on his neck. “Everything is fine. In fact, it’s perfect.”

Then Ryder’s eyes found Bram’s and a seductive smile spread across his face, causing Bram to suck in a breath. “Promise.”

Chapter 11

Tanner

Tanner watched both men as they looked at each other. Before he could protest again, he felt Bram's gentle caress on his skin as he ran his hand down Tanner's body. As Bram locked gazes with Ryder, Tanner allowed himself to be positioned on his side between them again, the warmth seeping into his suddenly chilled skin.

He shivered as Ryder's naked torso pressed up against his back, his hand gliding over Tanner's shoulders as Bram continued to stroke up and down his side. As if in tandem, both men moved closer to him, his body pressed between them. Their thin shorts did nothing to hide the fact they wanted him, and if his erection currently pressing against Bram's stomach was any indication, he wanted this just as badly as they did.

Smooth lips grazed his shoulder again and Tanner shivered when Ryder's scruff rubbed against his rapidly heating skin. With Bram's shirt now off, the two men pressed harder against Tanner's body, the soft hair on their chests making his skin break out in goose bumps. He knew he should probably stop this. He had never wanted to come between them. But as their hands ran over his exposed skin, all he could think was, *God, yes.*

It had been too long since he'd felt someone's hands on him like this. Too long since he'd given up his worries and fears to simply allow himself to feel wanted. To feel desired. To feel... needed. His thoughts were interrupted when Bram's hand glided from his side and swept across his abs. Tanner sucked in a breath as those strong fingers barely touched his skin, making him arch up against them so he could feel more of Bram's touch. As soon as he'd arched his back into Bram's touch, he gasped when he felt Ryder's fingertips smoothing over his spine. The sensation of the two of them, running their fingers and palms lower on his skin was enough to send his cock twitching against Bram.

As Ryder's hand rounded over his ass and the material of his boxers, Bram caught his eye and skimmed his fingers lightly at the band of his boxers. He leaned over to brush his lips over Tanner's temple and murmured, "This still okay? We can stop at any time."

Tanner thought he would lose his mind if they stopped now. Clearing his throat, he whispered, "I don't want to stop." He paused and looked over his shoulder at Ryder, his golden eyes half-lidded with desire. "Please don't stop."

All at once, hands made their way over Tanner's body. Gentle caresses that cupped his ass and skimmed over his rock hard cock. Lips that smoothed over his chest and back, with just the barest hint of stubble to make his body tremble harder than it already was. Together, both men tugged at his boxer shorts. Ryder shifted just enough to slide them down over Tanner's hips and legs, tugging his own shorts off and dropping the clothes on the floor. Tanner's body was still facing Bram, but when Ryder pressed up against him, he felt every defined inch of that warm body behind him.

"You're beautiful, Tanner," Ryder murmured against his shoulder. "Beautiful and strong and so incredibly sexy." Tanner began to shake his head. He wasn't strong and hadn't felt desirable in so long. But Bram's lips vibrated against his neck when he added, "You're all of those things and more. So much more."

Their words pierced his heart. How long had he wanted someone to desire and cherish him? How long had he waited for someone to feel this way about him? But the thought of losing them, both of them walking away and turning their back on him instantly crept into his mind. Bram must have felt him tense because he lifted his lips from Tanner's skin and softly touched his cheek with his fingertips. "No more running, Tanner. Just be here with us. Right here. Right now."

Again, his heart constricted as Bram's words washed over him. For the first time since his dad died, he let go and just allowed himself to get lost in the moment. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against Ryder's chest, reveling in the feel of Ryder's arm as it draped over him. With Ryder's warm breath on his neck, he felt fingers softly skim his nipples, circling and tweaking with each pass. When Ryder rolled the taut bud between his fingers, Tanner's breath hitched as he bucked back against Ryder's hard length. A subtle shift of the mattress in front of him caught his attention, his eyes barely opening in time to see Bram tug his own shorts off.

Tanner's mouth opened in pleasure and surprise when his gaze traveled down Bram's naked body and rested on his thick cock. Tentatively, Tanner reached out a hand and gently ran his finger over it. It jutted out from a dark nest of hair, a small pearl of precum glistening at the tip. When Bram sucked in a breath, Tanner flashed his eyes up to Bram's. His eyes were almost black with lust, but it was the need in them that helped bolster Tanner's confidence. With just the barest of pressure, he ran his fingers up and down Bram's length, his heart hammering in his chest when Bram arched forward into his touch.

Letting go of the last of his doubts, he wrapped his palm around Bram's length and began slow, gentle strokes. It had been so long since he'd been touched, but even longer since he'd been in a position to take his time and enjoy the person in bed with him. He had only ever had sex with one man at a time before, and the sensation of Ryder running his hands over his ass and thighs while he was touching Bram this way made him wonder why he had never tried this before.

He sighed with relief when he saw Bram's arm slip between their bodies, his hand warm against his stomach as his fingers curled around Tanner's cock. Bram hooked his free arm under Tanner's back and pulled him forward. As if it was the most natural thing in the world, Bram closed the distance between them and brushed his lips over Tanner's.

Tanner closed his eyes and just let himself enjoy the feeling of these two men as they ran their hands over him, pressing closer to him, their bodies gently rocking against his. The kiss was slow and sensuous with Bram tracing his lips with his tongue, stopping only to tug on Tanner's lower lip with his teeth before beginning that torturously sweet circuit over his lips again. The sensory overload was almost too much with Ryder's teeth grazing his shoulder and Bram's tongue demanding entrance into Tanner's mouth. He was lost on a wave of pleasure, and he wished to all the gods above that this wasn't going to stop any time soon.

The pace picked up as tender touches evolved into something harder, faster, more insistent. Bram's mouth moved down to his jaw while Ryder nipped and sucked on the join between his shoulder and neck. Tanner heard a soft snick then gasped when he felt Ryder's now slick cock rub along the cleft of his ass. Keeping one arm wrapped around Tanner's chest, his fingers rolling and tugging Tanner's nipple, Ryder passed a small bottle of lube to Bram over Tanner's shoulder. Tanner's breaths stuttered when Bram, keeping his gaze firmly locked on Tanner's, opened the bottle and poured some into his palm. He kept eye contact up until his mouth slanted over Tanner's, his slick hand wrapping around Tanner's cock.

Tanner writhed between them, his cry of pleasure swallowed by Bram who continued his assault on Tanner's mouth. The slip and slide of Ryder's length against his ass, the firm pumping of Bram's hand on his cock, sent Tanner higher and higher.

Before he could register what Bram was doing, the man facing him had shifted his body a little further down the bed and loosened his hand on Tanner's

body for only a second before Tanner's eyes flew open in ecstasy. The hand around his cock didn't fully wrap around his length anymore, but the delicious friction of Bram's body sliding along his almost had him coming right then and there.

Both men picked up the pace, sliding, grinding, pumping, and stroking in a synchronous rhythm that had to have come from years together. Bram stroked their cocks faster and Ryder picked up his pace, grinding against Tanner with total abandon. Tanner felt the long-forgotten jolt of electricity race down his spine, his fingers scraping over Bram's chest as his hands curled into fists. He slammed his eyes shut and threw his head back and cried out some unintelligible string of moans and words, his cock throbbing against Bram's as his cum coated not only Bram's hand, but his stomach as well.

He was gasping for breath when he felt the two men on either side of him tense and arch their backs, the bodies grinding harder against his. Together, they cried out, both of them striping his stomach and back with jets of warm semen.

Chapter 12

Ryder

Ryder lay back in the bed, his chest heaving as if he'd just run a 5K. A warm arm draped over him, pulling him onto his side and against the man next to him. He sighed against Tanner's neck, fully sated and happy.

They had spent the rainy weekend in each other's arms, stopping only to shower and eat. There was no awkwardness, no reservations, nothing but the sense that this was where they all belonged. After that first time in Tanner's bed, they had taken him by the hand and led him into their bedroom. Together, they showered and washed each other, their soft kisses replacing the conversation that they would have to have later. Clean and sated, they fell asleep in his and Bram's bed, a tangle of bodies that had no beginning and no ending.

Tanner was the first to wake, his body trembling from the cold, even though he was sandwiched between the two men. Ryder shifted and pulled him closer in his arms, the kisses they shared sweet and slow. Bram woke not too long after and crawled around to spoon him from behind. Something unspoken was shared over his shoulder when Bram and Tanner's eyes met, but Ryder didn't try to decipher what it meant once their hands were on him.

Bram wrapped his arms around Ryder's chest and rocked his cock against his ass while Tanner slid down the bed, kissing Ryder's now feverishly warm skin as he went lower and lower. There should have been so many reasons for what they were doing to be wrong, so many reasons to stop it. Instead, Ryder closed his eyes and let the two men in bed with him love and take care of him. Soft kisses and hands seemed to cover every inch of his body as Tanner took Ryder into his mouth at the same time he felt Bram's slick fingers slide past his tight ring of muscle. Together they caressed him, sucked him, fucked him with nothing but gentle moans of their pleasure disturbing the quiet of the room.

And that was how they spent the entire weekend. Sleeping, kissing, touching, loving, fucking, and food. It was as if they couldn't get enough of each other, even though their bodies had been sated many times over.

When Sunday evening rolled around, they cuddled together in bed and talked. Tanner shared more about his life in Callatown before he had finally been able to leave, while Ryder and Bram talked about their life together, how

they met, and what they had never thought they wanted. A third. Before Tanner had entered their lives, Ryder had never entertained the idea of having another person in their house, let alone another person in their bed and in their hearts. He and Bram were happy and content with each other. Why introduce someone else into that when it would most likely end in hurt feelings and jealousy? But after the past weekend, he couldn't imagine his and Bram's life without Tanner in it.

Bram's feelings echoed his own, his heart surging with love for the man who had stolen that heart so many years ago. It wouldn't always be easy, and most likely there would be growing pains that would have Ryder wanting to run the mountainside like Tanner had so many times before. But he wanted this, wanted both men, in his life and bed for as long as they would have him.

Relaxed and sated, he fell asleep, his hand intertwined with Bram's as their bodies cocooned Tanner's. When Ryder woke the next morning, he smiled and realized it was the first night they hadn't been woken up by Tanner's screaming. That thought carried him through his workday as he counted the hours until he was back home and in his lovers' arms again.

Chapter 13

Bram

The nightmares weren't gone completely, but they helped Tanner through them, together. And together they moved Tanner's things into their bedroom, falling asleep in a tangle of limbs and bodies every night.

As the weeks passed, Tanner came out of his shell more and more. His normally pale skin began to show the healthy glow of being outside in the sun. There were times Tanner took steps back, usually after hearing about another bombing or mass killing in Callatown. Bram's heart still ached when the past and present of what happened in Callatown caught up to Tanner and he left the house to run. He didn't stay away long and usually came back more at peace, but Bram knew it would be a long time before that part of Tanner's life didn't haunt him anymore.

With a tiny bit of begging and pleading on his part and some encouraging smiles from Ryder, Tanner finally relented and signed up for summer classes at the university. Bram beamed with pride at what a natural Tanner was, and helped him with his studies whenever he could. Ryder was the one who stayed up late and corrected his essays or philosophy assignments, and Bram helped him through his Bio I class. There were moments of frustration from Tanner over how unprepared he felt for college and many sleepless nights that had nothing to do with the bedroom, but together they navigated the waters that were so foreign to all of them.

On the last day of the summer term, Bram stood on the porch to their cabin and looked out at the mountains. It was the first day he and Ryder had off together in almost a month, but the house seemed too quiet with Tanner gone. His thoughts were interrupted and he smiled when he felt familiar arms circle his waist. The turn of his head was rewarded with a soft kiss and a gentle smile.

They stayed like that for a few minutes listening to the steady sound of their heartbeats and the gentle breeze blowing the leaves across the ground.

“Are you happy?”

Bram stilled for a moment, turning the question over in his mind before answering. With a gentle tug on Ryder's arm, he pulled his lover around to face him and cradled his face in his hands. “I am. Are you?”

He watched as Ryder smiled and nodded, his heart clenching from that answer alone. "I am. I never thought... I mean, I figured it would just be the two of us. Once I met you, I knew you were the only one for me. But now..."

"Now there's Tanner."

Bram sighed and pulled Ryder into his arms. "You know I love you, right?" He felt rather than saw Ryder's head nod against him as he buried his face into Bram's neck.

"And you know I will always love you."

Again, a small nod brushed against his skin, but he pulled back so he could see Ryder's eyes. "So the question is, do we have enough love for the three of us?"

Ryder's eyes held so many emotions in them, but the one that settled and stayed there was love. He leaned forward and brushed his lips over Bram's as he whispered, "Yes."

Bram's heart shifted inside his chest, rearranging itself with that one simple word from Ryder's lips. With their arms wrapped around each other, they stood in silence, both fully aware that one word had sealed their future.

Epilogue

Lady Estrella heard the fray before she was fully able to see it. What met her eyes when she rounded the corner stopped her in her tracks, a smile sliding across her face.

A large felis with a brown and black tortoise shell coat was running at full speed across the snow-covered stretch of land that ran behind Ryder and Bram's house. Suddenly a blur of movement caught her eye as a slightly smaller, sleek shifter raced past the larger felis, surpassing him in mere seconds before he reached the tree line. The sleek tan and black cat held its head up high and preened as it watched the other shifter approach it, shocking that smug look off its face when the larger cat tackled it to the ground.

Her laughter escaped her lips before she could catch herself, earning her the attention of the beautiful man standing a few yards in front of her. Ryder's smile was radiant as he turned and walked over to her. Her status prevented her from showing favoritism amongst her clan, but the man standing next to her and his long-time partner were very close to filling that position in her heart.

"Do they do this often?"

Ryder chuckled and looked back out at the two cats as they took turns pouncing and pinning each other. "Would you like the truth or would it be better for me to salvage a little bit of Bram's dignity right here and now?"

Lady Estrella laid a hand on his arm and squeezed gently. "I'd like the truth, but not about that. I'll leave it to my imagination. But I do want to know if you're happy? If Tanner and Bram are happy?"

His answering smile said it all, but it still made her heart sing when he nodded. "We are. I never thought I could love someone as much as I love Bram." He paused and looked straight into her eyes before continuing. "It's not the same, though. They're both so different. But I love them both. Very much."

When the two shifters realized Ryder's was not the only gaze on them, they shifted back into their human forms and made their way over to the house.

"Lady Estrella."

"Bram. You look well. The exercise regimen you have going on looks good on you."

With a mixture of embarrassment and good humor, Bram chuckled. "I try, my regent."

“Hello Tanner. I’ve heard wonderful things from your professors at the university.”

She watched as Tanner’s pale skin bloomed with color, but his green eyes held hers as a shy smile spread across his face. “Thank you, Lady Estrella. I’m trying hard to keep up with it all.”

She smiled at the duality of that statement. So much had happened in his life over the course of the past year. He looked better than she had ever seen him, but she had to be sure.

“The construction is almost finished on the new housing facility. I thought you three would like to know. Just in case...” She purposely let the end of that sentence fade, wanting them to make the decision on their own. It was obvious they were in love, but sometimes that wasn’t enough and one needed an out.

Silence hung in the air between them, until a soft but sure voice broke it. “That’s wonderful, my regent, but I’ve found my home.”

Both men moved until they were on either side of Tanner, their arms winding their way around his body and towards each other. She smiled as she watched them and nodded her head.

“Yes. Yes you have.”

The End

Author Bio

Eileen Griffin lives in Texas, but loves to travel and has spent many summers crossing Europe with nothing but a backpack on her back. She enjoys TexMex, lives for good wine, and has a certain penchant for purple unicorns. She loves reading all genres of books, but her current obsession is writing M/M romance. Her past published works include: Chasing Matt, a M/M novella coauthored with Nikka Michaels, Dinner For Two, a M/F romance novella, and “Claiming Ayden”, a M/M shifter romance that is part of Evenight’s Alpha’s Claim Anthology: M/M Edition.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Blog](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Facebook Author Page](#) | [Goodreads](#)

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LOVE THE LITTLE GUYS

By M.E. Sanford

Photo Description

A beautiful, feminine-looking young man faces the camera with a slight smile on his face. He has feather clips on the lashes of both eyes, which are also heavily lined with mascara. Studs in his lips, upswept blond hair, and an utterly peaceful aura complete his look. He seems like he's not afraid of what he likes, and he is willing to let people see that side of him, that openness of his quirks and what he enjoys, without feeling guilty.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Please help me find a love of my own. I'd like a cute, pixie-faced little bottom-boy to love, but my type of guy always want a manly-man top, and not little femme me. I know I'm small, guys always assume I'm a bottom, then are surprised when they realise I'm a top. I can't tell you how many times I've been rejected...

I've got a big heart, but no one to give it to.

Sincerely,

Maddox

PS. I'd really like some plot to go with the sexy-times, if possible.

No historical, no war, if possible no PWP

Thank you.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: Native American, yoga, twinks, flamboyant characters, effeminate top, HFN

Word Count: 5,020

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LOVE THE LITTLE GUYS

By M.E. Sanford

Chapter One

Joel stared at the picture of his ex-boyfriend with a painful longing in his heart. Travis didn't mean to hurt Joel so badly; he wasn't a cruel guy. But Joel was a twink in every sense of the stereotype, save one.

Joel was a total top. There's nothing wrong with that; often men who participated in intercourse with other guys had a preference should they ever engage in anal. But Joel lacked the Adonis frame that he was expected to possess. Sometimes, his almost lovers would scoff or laugh while dressing to leave after discovering that Joel wasn't a closet power bottom.

Small and lithe, built like a slim dancer, Joel was the epitome of a beautiful man. But, when it came to how he performed in bed, he surprised his lovers.

The music blared in the nightclub while Joel looked down from the upper floor balcony at the inebriated dancers. He was sipping his mimosa when a person knocked him into the banister, and the drink slipped from his grasp.

Almost as if falling in slow motion, Joel watched as the glass landed atop a dancer's head with a painful sounding *thud* and covered him with the beverage. Joel screamed along with the dancer, as the red in the glass simulated blood.

He sprinted downstairs to help the man but saw him being escorted away, holding his hand over his head.

"Is he all right?" Joel inquired as he neared the office of the bar. "I'm so sorry."

Two guys stared at him in disgust, and Joel cowered.

"Please tell me. Is he hurt?"

"That was your drink?" a man asked, with an intense lisp. The lights overhead swayed when a tall man left the office and faced Joel.

"It was my drink. I'm so sorry," Joel apologized with a bow and tried to maintain his composure. What if the man was hurt? What if he was cut by the glass? "It wasn't on purpose."

"That was my brother you hit with that glass," the tall man growled. He was enormous compared to Joel's modest height. And the man's bulk made Joel feel the urge to flee. He'd never stand a chance against a man that big.

Joel straightened his shoulders and looked up at the tall man. "I said I'm sorry. May I please apologize to him?" he asked. The man looked down at Joel, with an amused expression.

"You're a little guy. What's your name?" the man asked.

"Joel Grabin."

"Well, Joel Grabin, my brother is named Max. Go ahead and apologize. He's cleaning up in the bathroom."

Joel opened the door to the bathroom and paused at the sight of a beautiful man, bare chested and standing before the bathroom mirror. His deeply tanned skin was smooth and flawless over taut, toned muscles that looked like he participated in regular aerobics or yoga. There was a grace and elegance to the way he stood, his back straight and strong, while he pulled a brush through his damp, black hair. His hair ran down his back and shifted off his shoulders.

"Are you Max?" Joel inquired.

The man looked over at him slowly, even the motion of glancing over at Joel being smooth and graceful.

"I am," Max replied, without another word. He looked back to the mirror and continued combing his hair. "You are?"

"I'm Joel." He lurched forward. He wanted to comfort Max and hold the man still, so that he could help with the glass removal himself. "That was my drink that hit you. Are you all right?"

Max's eyes flickered over to Joel's reflection in the mirror, but he didn't turn toward him.

"I think I'm okay. But it really hurt."

"God, I'm so sorry. Can I help you?"

"No, I'm all right. Just a headache. I don't think any real damage was done." Max winced. "What happened?"

"The drink fell from my hand when my arm got bumped. It was an accident. I can't apologize enough."

Joel could see the red line running down Max's nape, down his back, and beginning to stain the line of his denim pants.

"Holy crap, you're bleeding," Joel gasped. He moved forward and wet a paper towel, quickly wiping the blood from Max's waist, moving up and

stroking over smooth, taugth skin. He didn't even realize what he was doing when he took Max's long hair into his hand and brushed it to the side to expose a broad shoulder and lean torso.

The cut was tiny, but enough that it bled freely down Max's body. Guilt and shame flooded Joel's mind while he wiped it away and applied pressure to the wound.

"Thank you," Max whispered. Joel glanced at the man's face. A pair of dark-brown eyes met his gaze, and he noticed Max's high cheek bones and his strong brow.

Joel's hands shook at the sight of the man, and he cleared his throat.

"My pleasure," Joel breathed, as he leaned in, and their lips brushed.

Max pulled away but not far enough to break Joel's pressure on his head.

"I'm so sorry for that." Joel shivered. What was he thinking, kissing the man out of the blue? Was he that desperate?

"Don't worry about it. Just," Max paused, "go about your night. I think I'm done. It was nice to meet you, Joel."

Joel sprinted out of the bar with his head hanging. He had offered his card to Max's brother in an attempt at atonement for his carelessness. If he were to be sued for the injury, then he would accept any punishment.

When he got home, he stripped down and moved to the mirror. His makeup was still well-applied, something he did every time he went out. Though Travis never approved of his desire to perfect his complexion for the outside world, it always made Joel feel safe and secure.

Max was a very handsome man. Joel wondered about his nationality; Max looked Native American, or maybe Latino, Joel wasn't sure.

"What was I thinking, trying to kiss him?" Joel voiced. There was a fire when he was near Max that made his mind fog and his cock harden. He needed to get laid.

The screen flashed when he booted up his computer and instantly wandered to the hookup sites.

"Looking for masculine dude," Joel read. "Just a hung jock looking for same. Want a masculine man. No femmes."

He turned off the computer and went for his phone app.

“Masculine man looking for same. No femmes.”

Hanging his head, Joel took a shower and imagined the most beautiful pixie man that he could. Skinny, short, and totally ready for Joel to use his body the way he wanted. It was enough to make Joel hard, and he stroked himself off in the shower while he sighed.

Nobody wanted a man like Joel. He was too small and too pretty to be the top. He wanted to please a man, while allowing his lover to lose himself in what Joel was giving. That was what he wanted. But finding it was difficult.

His twenty-fourth birthday had come and gone, and he was fast approaching the middle of his third decade on earth. Three previous boyfriends had taught Joel that he needed to grow several inches, gain at least twenty pounds, or be the one to let the guys fuck him silly. But he hated bottoming!

It doesn't feel right, Joel reflected. Nothing was as fulfilling as having a lover moaning beneath him while he pleased them both.

Travis, Joel's ex, didn't seem to understand or desire that dynamic. Travis was small, just as Joel wanted, but he couldn't find pleasure in the shape and size of Joel's body.

“Fuck this,” Joel cursed. He checked his schedule for the next few days and realized the yoga classes he taught had filled quite a bit during the week and he was going to be busy. Maybe he could find a date in one of his classes? “How sad is that? I need to cruise my job to find a guy.”

There was nothing about Joel that screamed power and masculinity. It broke his heart that so many men wanted a big guy in their bed.

Having only shame in his heart, Joel went to sleep.

Chapter Two

“Are you sure that you’re going to need somebody soon?” Joel wanted to decline the work opportunity, but his recent clubbing binge had drained his wallet dry.

“I can’t go tonight, Joel. I really messed up my knee, I mean seriously messed it up. I can barely bend my leg,” Micah complained through the receiver.

“All right, I’ll take your class.”

“Thank you very much. It will only be for about a week. I promise, the moment I can, I will return.”

With that conversation out of the way Joel sighed and sat down on the couch. He looked at his watch and huffed.

No time for a shower, he thought.

Grabbing his bag for work, he went out and drove off down the street. Joel hated the lights and the way they curled into the streets. They reminded him of giant claws. When he saw an accident a few years ago, a man sat trapped in his car while the light poles collapsed over his doors and pinned him inside. Joel shivered at the memory. He hated being trapped.

It was a fear that he’d realized during his teenage years. After being caught in an avalanche one horrible day, he could no longer stand being in enclosed spaces. He wasn’t sure if that meant he was claustrophobic, but it wouldn’t surprise him.

The gym was bright as he pulled up.

“Hey, Joel.” The hot guy at the desk smiled. Joel never really looked at him, save to return the greeting. He had trouble keeping his eyes off the man’s incredible chest and bulging arms. He wasn’t his kind of guy, but he was feeling very horny as of late.

His students were preparing for class when he entered and moved to place his mat down.

“Where’s Micah?” a woman inquired. Joel smiled at her.

“He hurt his knee pretty badly,” Joel replied. The students groaned, while Joel readied his mat. “I’ll be back in a few.”

Joel wandered to the gym locker room and moved through the crowd of buff men and naked old guys who waltzed through the area. He hated the locker room—there was too much sweat, and he felt that he was inhaling a lot of dead skin.

When he pulled down his pants, he noticed that the locker to his bottom right was free—a miracle for that time of night. So, Joel knelt down and placed his clothing in the small area. A shadow fell over him, and he froze.

“Excuse me. I’m just reaching over you for a moment,” a voice spoke. Joel let his eyes move to the side while he tried to stretch his gaze. Deeply tanned feet and finely haired legs were in his sight. A scent of sweat filled Joel’s nose, but he wasn’t as repulsed as usual.

The shadow pulled back, and Joel stood up to see Max watching him. His dark eyes widened.

“Oh wow, Joel.” Max smiled at him widely. “What are you doing here?”

Joel blushed. “I’m teaching the yoga class for the next week,” he admitted.

“That’s funny.”

“Why?”

“I’m taking that class. I have been for the past several months, in fact,” Max chuckled.

“Okay, great. I’ll see you in there, then.”

Joel turned away and decided not to worry about changing his shirt. There was no way he felt comfortable exposing his torso to Max while the man was so damned gorgeous himself. Only when Joel was sure Max was too busy dressing himself, did he turn to view the man again.

Max was small, shorter than Joel with a petite build. But even with that bone structure, it didn’t take away from the raw masculine appeal that Max possessed.

Joel blinked, and Max was gone. He cursed and ran to the yoga room.

Joel began his class with a meditative stretch—legs crossed, and hands together. He focused on guiding white healing light through all the chakras and

producing a kind energy of love and peace, before he felt ready to begin the session.

His class was not for amateurs. Each of them knew every move Joel instructed, and Joel was pleased that, not once, did he need to assist with pose or form. It was a luxury in his world, as at almost every other class, somebody needed help. He often didn't get to enjoy his own sessions, for that reason.

"Downward dog," Joel stage whispered. He watched his students move into position, and when they held it, he allowed himself a moment to look at Max's extended body. His long, black hair was pulled back in a tie, and it fell to the floor, obscuring his face.

Joel shifted and moved into a lotus form before ending the class. He guided them in a meditation, and while they sat in silence, he kept his eyes on Max.

Good god, I want that man, Joel sighed internally. He loved small guys. Their petite bodies and fine, lean frames were so damned beautiful.

Class was over, and Joel escorted the students out with a friendly word. Max was the last to fold up his mat and undo the tie of his hair.

"Would you like to go out sometime?" Joel spewed as Max neared. The man's eyes went wide in surprise, but he smiled.

"Go out? Like a date?" Max inquired.

"Um, yeah, like a date. I mean, if that's not your thing, forget it. I could have read you wrong. If so, I'm really sorry. I mean there are lots of—"

"It's all right. Yeah, we can go out. Are you free tomorrow night?"

"Yeah, I don't have class tomorrow. Here's my number." Joel handed Max his business card, and their fingers brushed lightly.

Max stood before Joel for a long time shifting from foot to foot as though he had something to say. The light sheen of sweat glistened off Max's deeply tanned skin and ran in erotic rivulets down his long throat. The sleeveless shirt he wore stuck to his lithe body nicely, and Joel could feel the start of an unfortunate erection in his pants.

Without another word, Max pulled away slowly, his eyes locked onto Joel with an unreadable expression. He then turned away and made his way to the locker room.

“Fuck,” Joel cursed. There was a fire in his heart, a determination that spurred him to do the things he wanted. He wanted Max, wanted him badly. Joel could only hope that Max felt the same intensity.

Joel loved makeup, chick flicks, yoga, and cosmopolitans. He loved manicures, tiny men, and beautiful bottoms. Nobody wants a tiny top; that's why his exes never lasted.

“I'm not going to let that happen again. I'm going to make him want me as a top,” Joel promised himself.

Tossing his wet towel to his mat, he sprinted into the locker room and found the area where Max had been standing earlier. But he wasn't anywhere to be found now, so he wandered around, searching for him.

Chapter Three

Joel ran outside in hopes that Max was in sight. Sure enough, his long, black hair was barely visible further down the lot, almost as far as the edge of the forest.

Springing forward with all his strength, Joel bounded across the lot and got to Max just as he had reached for his door handle.

“Max,” Joel announced. Max started, and turned to face Joel.

“What’s wrong?” Max asked, while Joel put a hand on his cheek.

Joel leaned in and brought his face close to Max’s.

“Stop me if you want,” Joel whispered, as he closed his eyes. He kissed Max softly on the lips, finding the man’s to be soft and warm. He pulled back and kissed him again.

Max responded to the second kiss and pushed back, kissing in return. Their hands groped at each other’s backs, exploring the muscles around their spines, while their lips pushed closer.

With his face heated, Joel pulled away and could see Max’s throat muscles were taut.

“Would you like to come back to my place?” Max invited shakily. The man looked rigid and nervous, his fingers dug into the base of his sleeveless shirt.

“I’d love to,” Joel replied. “Just let me grab my things.”

Joel rode with Max in the little Mini Cooper, all the while watching the muscles in Max’s strong jawline flex as he drove. His arms were long and toned with firm muscles, but also slender and fine.

“You’re beautiful, you know?” Joel complimented.

“Thank you for saying that. I feel out of place in this city. There aren’t many of my race in this area,” Max responded with a weak smile.

“You’re not straight are you?” Joel joked.

Max guffawed heartily and wiped his eyes when he was finished. “No, I’m gay. I mean Native American people. I moved away from a reservation a few years back.”

“I was trying to figure out your ethnicity.”

“Is that all right?”

Joel looked at Max. “What do you mean?”

“That I’m Native American. Is that all right?”

“Absolutely! Why would that be a problem?”

“It’s just that lots of guys turn me down because of my heritage. They think I’m poor by birth. At least that’s what people say to me.”

“You’re joking. People don’t say that.”

“They do.”

Joel sat back in the passenger seat and stared ahead. He pondered Max’s words carefully. If he were honest with himself, Joel had no idea what it was like to be Native American in such a big city. He thought about his own life, sometimes being rejected by guys because of his small frame. It must be difficult for Max.

“I don’t really care. I get rejected all the time for my body,” Joel announced, while turning back to face Max.

“Why would you get rejected? You’re gorgeous.” Max smiled.

“I’m small. People think I’m a bottom. But I’m actually a total top.”

Max was silent for a very long time. Joel started to feel nervous and played with the hem of his shirt while he watched the man driving.

“So, you’re a top,” Max finally choked.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I should have said something.”

“We’re at my place. Come inside with me, please?”

Once up the two flights of stairs, Joel stepped inside Max’s apartment and was immediately calmed by the presence of beautiful, intricate dream catchers hung along the walls. There were small candles sitting along the edge of a table and incredible Native American headdresses hanging over the edges of the tall cabinets at both ends of the room.

Towers of books sat in disarray on the shelves, looking as though they were read so often that Max never felt the drive to put them back neatly.

“Are you single?” Joel asked with a smile. He felt comfortable.

“I am. Are you single as well?” Max returned.

“Yeah. But back to before, is it all right that I’m a—” Joel couldn’t finish before Max lunged forward and grabbed Joel’s face for a deep, bruising kiss.

“I’m sorry. I just really need someone like you. I’ve been looking for you for so long,” Max stated with a soft smile.

Joel pulled Max’s shirt up and over his head before kissing him again.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been looking for someone beautiful and built like you, but still kind and inviting.”

Eyes burning with welling tears, Joel kissed Max and this time allowed his fingers to twine into his long, black hair. Max gasped as his head was pulled back, and he groaned as Joel kissed up and down his vulnerable throat.

Joel wanted to fuck Max. It was a desire he needed to sate, but he wasn’t able to bring himself to be so mindless with the small, gorgeous man.

“Do you have a condom?” Joel asked, while he lapped against the pulse at Max’s exposed neck before moving up towards Max’s jaw.

“Yes, and lube,” Max replied breathlessly.

“Take me to your bedroom.”

Inside Max’s bedroom, Joel didn’t bother to wait. He pushed Max onto the bed. Max landed with a grunt before leaning up on his elbows. Joel leaned forward and kissed the firm muscles on his stomach before grabbing Max’s pants.

“Are you sure?” Max asked, as Joel began to reveal delicate flesh and slim hips.

“I am,” Joel breathed, while he yanked the pants and underwear down off Max’s legs. He straightened and stared at the naked man on the bed. The deeply tanned skin was pulled tight over toned muscles in a lithe, athletic body. Jet-black hair was splayed all over the bed, while the beautiful man sighed and moved wantonly.

Max sat up and pulled on Joel’s hips, making him shift and fall onto the bed. Max nuzzled against Joel’s crotch, mouthing over his erection in his pants.

Joel stroked Max's hair while the man slowly pulled down his pants. When his cock fell free, he groaned as Max took his leaking head into his mouth and suckled softly.

It had been so long since he'd been touched that he could feel the ache in his body for pleasure and release.

Max sucked him deeply, taking his shaft to the back of his throat before Max stopped suddenly and leaned over Joel as Joel put his hands on the muscles and ribs of Max's beautiful body.

Joel grabbed Max's hips and turned him onto his stomach, his body laid out over the expanse of the bed.

Stripping the rest of his clothing, Joel placed himself over Max's body and felt him curve up against Joel's aching erection. He reached up and brushed Max's hair off his neck, licking and kissing the column up to his ear.

"What do you like?" Joel breathed, as he slipped his tongue into Max's ear. Max gasped and quaked beneath him, while Joel ground down against his firm ass.

"I like being penetrated while held down," Max replied.

"All right." Joel reached over and ripped open the condom but didn't put it on. Instead of readying himself, he lubed a finger and leaned forward so that his face was near Max's.

Max had his eyes closed and lips parted, while he breathed raggedly. He squeezed his eyes shut firmly and gasped as Joel inserted his finger into his body then he began to shift and smear the lube around Max's entrance.

"Oh god, that feels good," Max cooed as Joel worked him.

Joel moved two fingers inside Max and scissor-spread his fingers to stretch his entrance and ready him.

"Please, please," Max gasped.

"I'm going to fuck you now," Joel sighed into Max's ear. He readied the condom, covered his throbbing cock, and lubed himself.

Taking hold of Max's wrists, he held them down on the bed, while Max raised his ass to meet Joel's pelvis.

Joel kept his face against Max's nape, occasionally moving to kiss his shoulder or the nape of his long neck. He thrust forward.

When the head of his erection entered Max's body, the man grunted and gasped. Max turned his face into the bed and groaned, while Joel pressed in, watching Max carefully. Finally, Max's hot body pulled him in completely, and they were joined.

"Joel," Max gasped as his body shifted, and he writhed below Joel's weight. His skin began to shine when he started to sweat, and Joel began to thrust. Max yelled when Joel pushed and then smiled. "Yes, fuck me. I need it."

Joel obliged the man. He ground into Max, feeling the heat of his body. He thrust down hard but realized that the man beneath him was far too beautiful to be kept on his stomach. He pulled out, and Max grunted at the escape.

Max was submissive as Joel pulled him over onto his back and moved back over him, sliding between his legs. Max wrapped his thighs around Joel's waist and grabbed his back while he kissed him.

Joel wiped the hair from Max's face, smiling as Max sighed and kissed his palm. He pushed his tongue into the man's mouth just as his cock entered Max again.

This time was different. He watched Max as he thrust into the small man. His face shifted to something between pain and pleasure. He winced, smiled, gasped, and grunted while Joel thrust.

Joel could feel each thrust as his cock struck Max's prostate, sending the man moaning and throwing back his head to reveal a long, soft throat. Joel suckled against the delicate skin below Max's jaw and realized after a while that his climax was approaching.

"I'm going to come," Joel announced mid-thrust. He groaned and buried his face into Max's throat, while his ejaculate filled his condom, and he thrust until nothing else came out and Joel felt like pudding.

Max gasped as Joel pulled out slowly, holding the oozing condom. Joel pulled it off and cleaned himself a bit before wiping Max's body clean.

The man was coated in sweat; his skin glistened, and his long hair stuck to his face as his breathing heaved.

Max began to sit up, but Joel pushed on his sternum.

"Did you really think I would stop this without helping you?" Joel murmured, while he stroked Max's lean chest.

Without asking, Joel grasped Max's long, vascular cock and pumped. He lubed his hand, coating Max's erection liberally.

Max breathed weakly as Joel pumped his dick and masturbated him. After only a few strong pulls, he arched up and yelled, while his cum shot up and onto his stomach and chest. He shot hard and long and coated Joel's hand with the load.

After a few minutes of rest, giggling softly while their hands explored each other's bodies, the two men moved to the shower, washing each other while they softly kissed and readied themselves for separation.

Joel stood at the door of Max's apartment, resisting a strong urge to stay and not let the man out of his sight.

"I had a great time," Max stated with a smile. He had his hair spread across his back while it dried. He touched Joel's arm. "Thank you."

"Would you," Joel kicked at the floor a moment, "still like to go out sometime?"

Max guffawed and smiled. "I'd love to. Just don't drop any glass on me."

"I promise."

With a quick kiss, they parted. Joel walked down the hallway, feeling Max's eyes on his back until he was in the stairwell.

"Joel!" Max ran into the hallway, his shirt hung open and draped off his shoulders.

"Yes?" Joel paused and faced the stunning Native American man. He felt something special merely from the sight of his new lover.

"Would you like a ride?"

Joel laughed with Max at the question. Having just come from an intimate session, both of them seemed to be linked mentally and shared a somewhat obtuse humor that would otherwise be taken as crude. Both felt quite at home.

"I'm all right, thank you. I feel like walking," Joel replied with a smile.

Joel stopped and took a deep breath once he stepped outside. He'd never hooked up so fast. And he never would have thought somebody like Max would accept a petite top. The picture in Joel's wallet ended up in his hand, as he stared at his ex-boyfriend.

“Sorry, Travis. You were wrong. I am a perfectly sized top.” Joel smiled at the picture before folding it and dropping it in the garbage. “And I am wanted.”

Skipping happily down the road, Joel kept turning back to stare at Max’s apartment building. He was excited, a sense of butterflies in his stomach. Could this be it? Did Joel finally find a man who wanted him, even with his tiny frame?

“I think I have,” Joel voiced. “Life is good.”

The End

Author Bio

A lifelong writer and storyteller, M.E. Sanford has always pursued creative careers. One of his passions is writing novels and other short stories.

Just recently he made a major move cross country to pursue a dream that includes publishing his stories that he's been working on the past several years. An entertainer at heart, M.E. follows the pull of his ambitions and turns his experiences into touching works of literature.

If just one person is touched by his stories he can consider himself a success.

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LOVE'S FIRST KISS

By Jambrea Jo Jones

Photo Description

Two men in bed under white covers. A tattooed guy is kissing the other guy on the cheek. It is a tender cuddling moment.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I have been a good boy all my life. Top two percent in high school, band and math nerd, went to University on an academic scholarship. I was never a nerd. I was just an invisible boy. I never even kissed a boy (or girl) until my second year of college. I guess you could say I was a bit on the naive side. Overall, it served me well most of my life. I was alone, but I was happy... wasn't I?

One day I was working on a client's website while sitting in my favorite chair at my local bubble tea shop (no coffee for me), and in walked the most beautiful man I have ever seen. The sleeves, the beard, the dark hair, the mesmerizing blue eyes. I couldn't stop staring. Of course he was straight, he had to be, no one THAT beautiful could possibly be gay, much less want little invisible me.

Tell me how we get from first blush to happily ever after, please?

Sincerely,

Brandilyn

P.S. Contemporary, please. No BDSM. Sex scene not required.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: bubble tea, established couple, geek, sweet/no sex, tattoos

Word Count: 4,283

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LOVE'S FIRST KISS

By Jambrea Jo Jones

“Quinn, do you remember the day we first met? You were so cute and you wouldn't really look at me. I could tell you were shy and your face was a little red. I just wanted to eat you up.” My boyfriend, Cord Peterson, wrapped his arms around my shoulders and pulled me closer. We were snuggled in our fluffy, white comforter, and I was all toasty warm, not wanting to move.

Cord made it better when he kissed my cheek, his beard scraping my face. I loved the way it felt against my skin. I would never get tired of being in his arms.

We were spending a lazy Sunday in bed; we didn't do it often, but it'd been a long week. I'd had a picky customer, and he'd had a busy week at the tattoo shop. Next week was looking to be just as hectic so we were taking time to just relax and had no plans to get out of bed before noon. He was still in his boxer briefs, but I was hoping to get him out of them. Usually we slept naked, but last night he'd been so exhausted I got as many clothes off of him as I could and put him to bed. The last tat he'd done had been over eight hours; what I *should* be doing was giving Cord a rub down, but I was too content being in his arms.

Cord's question made me think. That first day. I could remember it like it was yesterday.

Three Years Ago

I settled into my favorite chair and opened my laptop, ready to get down to work. Most days I could have the quiet corner in the back of the shop. I was always disappointed when someone else chose to sit there because I'd come to consider it mine.

Today I didn't have to worry about that. I was in my spot and ready to work. It was going to be a good day. I could feel it. I could see the whole place from that chair and my back was against the wall. In the middle of the coffee house there was a section of chairs and couches and while comfortable, they weren't conducive to work. I liked not having to worry about someone

hovering behind me. The work I did wasn't sensitive, but I'm a private person. Plus, I owed my clients that small bit of security.

I loved my little home away from home. I could work and not feel so alone. The employees knew me by name, and it was almost like having friends. I didn't have a lot of friends in the real world. Most of mine were found online. I have met a few of them in person, but it was only once a year at a convention. I have a guilty pleasure—I love to read gay romance. I might never find a true love, but reading about it made me happy. All my friends read the same thing, so it was wonderful to get to talk to them in person once a year.

And it wasn't like I was a complete hermit. I did have face-to-face client meetings from time to time, but the cool thing about being my own boss was I set the terms. That made me more comfortable because I could be in charge of the situation. I knew what would happen going into a meeting.

Today was like any other day. I had my laptop open, the client's information at the ready so I could get started on their website, when he walked in. Him. A guy I'd never seen before. That wasn't the thing that made me stop what I was doing and stare. Nope. He was the most ruggedly beautiful man I had ever seen. He was in a white tank top that showed off his muscular arms that were decorated with tattoos. I was pretty sure they called that a sleeve, but I'm not a hundred percent up on the lingo. I'd have to look it up. He had a well-groomed beard with dark hair. I wasn't close enough to see his eyes. Not yet.

He had to be straight. No way would someone like that go for someone like me even if he was gay. I'm invisible, a scrawny nerd. Not that I liked to think about myself that way. I didn't think I was a nerd at all, but others seemed to. Kids could be cruel, and it still haunted me. I liked to keep to myself and study, not party. Of course, I wouldn't have said no if I'd been invited, but there was always the fear it was a joke, and who wanted people laughing at them? Not me. I'm still pretty much the same as I was in school—good at math and other “nerdy” type things.

I don't even remember getting up, but the next thing I knew, I was in line behind the gorgeous man I wanted to climb like a monkey, naked. He smelled heavenly, but I needed to back up before he really thought I was a freak. God, I had no idea what had come over me. I really wanted to see what color his eyes were. If he would only turn around.

Please turn, please turn, please, please, please.

As if he'd heard my internal whiney baby, he turned to look over his shoulder and gave me a grin. Holy fuck he had a beautiful smile and the most mesmerizing blue eyes I had ever seen. The moment was over in seconds and he'd turned back around. It was his turn to order. I should have said something. Anything, but my tongue was tied. What could I possibly have said to the wickedly handsome stranger that wouldn't sound stupid? I mean—the only thing I could think of was... you're purdy. Social situations have never been a strong suit of mine. Telling him I'd like to lick those tattoos would probably be a bad idea as well, especially if he was straight. I really didn't want to get punched in the face today. Or any day.

I counted it as a lost opportunity. I'd just get my bubble tea and head back to my little sanctuary in the coffee house. I had work that needed to be done. I really should be focused on the website that was due tomorrow not the hunka-hunka burning love in front of me who could break me in half if he wanted to. God, look at those muscles. I wanted to lick the tattoos. Was I drooling? I wiped at my mouth just to make sure.

The man moved down the counter to wait for his drink to be made, and I was up.

"Hey, Quinn. Pineapple bubble tea for you?" The barista, Brandilyn smiled at me.

I gave her a grin and a nod. They really did know me so well here. It was nice and safe after the out-of-control feeling I'd had about the stranger.

"You know, you should try the taro. It is so yummy." Brandilyn winked at me.

"No way. I'll stick with my fruity goodness." I shook my head.

"You'd still be drinking lattes if I hadn't introduced you to them." She shook her finger at me.

"True, but I like squishy balls that pop in the fruity ones, I don't think I'd like the chewy balls." I was firm on that. I really didn't even want to think of the taste.

A snort from my left made me look over, and my face heated as I realized what I'd said.

"Fine. Have it your way. Pineapple bubble tea coming up." Brandilyn turned to give my order to the workers behind her.

I didn't know what to do with myself. If I moved over, I'd be closer to the guy and I was already so embarrassed. I wasn't a kid who would snicker any time someone said balls—wasn't sure if I should laugh. It was kind of funny. He'd laughed. And I *had* said balls. Now all I could think about was his and what they'd look like. How would they taste? I was so screwed. I just needed to slink back to my table and forget about the stranger.

My drink was set down on the counter, and I reached for it. My total focus was on picking up that drink and going to the table. The next thing I knew my tea was dripping down the front of hunky-dreamy guy's tank top. If I wasn't blushing before, I sure as shit was now.

"Oh my god! I am *so* sorry." I reached for some napkins and did my best, but nothing was working. I only managed to squish the little balls into his shirt. It might have started out white, but it was now a yellowish color.

"Hey. Stop. It's okay. I should probably introduce myself before you finish feeling me up." The guy winked at me.

"Um—I—just—here." I thrust more napkins at him.

"I'm Cord Peterson. And you?" Cord held out his hand.

"I'm—sorry."

"Funny name you've got there." Cord was smiling.

I will be the first to admit it scrambled my brain.

"No. I'm Quinn Weston." I was such an idiot.

Now the drop-dead gorgeous guy was going to walk out and I'd never see him again.

"Nice to meet you, Quinn. I'm new around here. Just opened a shop around the corner. You wouldn't mind if I shared a seat with you, would you?"

He wanted to share a seat. With me? This was in no way possible. I looked around the shop to make sure I wasn't on some gag show, but I didn't see any cameras. They do make them small these days. Was someone pulling a prank on me? But—who did I know that would do something like that. No one.

"Well—if you don't want to, that's okay. I'm not coming on too strong, am I?"

I blinked and looked around again. Brandilyn was grinning at me, and I noticed she wasn't the only one. I couldn't speak. What the hell was wrong

with me? Cord turned to walk away. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. He was going to leave with no contact, but first contact *had* been made. I should do—something.

“Wait!”

Great. I'd shouted, but what next. *Show him to your table.* Right. My table. Yes.

Cord turned around. I had to talk and get out of this odd state I was in.

“Yes?” Cord raised his eyebrow.

“My table.” I pointed toward the back.

“Quinn, I'll bring you another tea in a sec.” Brandilyn motioned for me to go away and mouthed, *he is hot.*

God, I hoped Cord hadn't seen, but when I looked over he was grinning. How could this be a good thing? I should just slink away now. But I didn't. I led the way to my table and hoped I could carry on a decent conversation.

Present Day

“I thought for sure you were going to laugh at me.” I snuggled into Cord's shoulder, fiddling with his underwear. It really needed to come off.

“And I thought for sure you'd let me walk out without talking to me.” Cord kissed my forehead.

“I was embarrassed.” He knew I was because I'd told him time and again that I never thought we would work because of what a klutz I was on that first meeting. I'd been sure I'd scared him.

“And I was the one wearing that awful tea crap you love.”

“It isn't awful.” I sniffed. That tea had brought us together. I was sure of it. If I hadn't spilled it, I never would have talked to him. I would have gone back to my corner and pined away for him.

“Yes, it is. With those weird little ball things and why do they call it tea? It's more like a fruit drink or something.”

“I don't know. I do know I was happy you stayed that day and talked to me.”

“I'm happy you agreed to an actual date.”

The date. I remembered it well. It was the next night. We were celebrating the fact that I had the website done. He'd insisted. I didn't balk—too much. Who would? He was a hot guy and interesting to talk to. Still was.

Three Years Ago

What the hell was I going to wear? It was my first date with Cord, and I was running late. I shouldn't have been. I work from home. I run my own hours, but I'd gotten lost in some code and it took the beeping from my phone alarm to get me out of my daze.

I took a quick shower, washing all my bits and parts. I wanted to look nice, but not like I'd spent hours trying to impress. Which was a good thing, since I only took about thirty minutes. The doorbell rang before I was ready for it, but it was now or never.

I was unprepared for what I saw. Cord cleaned up very well. He had on a button-down shirt, and if I hadn't seen him before in a tank top, I would have no idea about the lovely artwork on his body. I wondered if there was more and if I would get a chance to explore it anytime soon.

Of course, I was jumping the gun a little. I wanted the first date. I mean, I could just invite him in and jump him, but I kind of wanted to get to know him a little better first.

"Wow, you look great." I looked him up and down and hoped I didn't drool. What was it with me and the waterworks around him?

"Thanks. You look great too. Ready for dinner?" Cord grinned at me.

I almost melted and said *take me*, but I was good. I grabbed my keys and wallet off of the table by the door and locked up.

"Yes, I'm starving. There is a great place off of Lima; you want me to drive?"

"You'd better. I'll get all turned around. I had to GPS it to get here."

"No worries, you'll get it. And to be honest, my GPS is a good friend." I laughed.

It had the desired effect because Cord laughed too. We got into my SUV and headed to the restaurant. I hoped he liked it. It was one of my favorites because I could get sushi and steak. We kept conversation light on the way to the steakhouse.

“Have you lived in Fort Wayne long?”

“Most of my life. My folks split when I was younger and I moved out of the state with my mom for a bit, but ended up moving back to be with my dad. It was hard, but my dad and I are close. My mom moved back a few years ago, which is very nice. How about you?”

“I followed a friend. She’d lived here before and liked it. Said it was a nice place to open a shop so we did. I’m a military brat so I don’t have one real place I’d ever called home.”

“That’s sad.” I chanced a quick glance at him.

“Not really. I’m happy now. It’s nice here. Big town with a small-town feel. The company isn’t bad either.” Cord laid his hand on my thigh.

I had to force myself not to jump. God, I wanted his hands all over me and we were going out. To eat. In public. *Idiot*. We could be in my room right now doing the naked mambo. But no, I wanted to get to know him better. Crap. I was going to have to calm down or I’d have a boner showing when we walked into the restaurant.

“I. You.”

“You okay, Quinn?”

I cleared my throat. Would I ever *not* be embarrassed around him? That is if we even made it past this stage. Maybe it’d be a one-time thing. I was jumping the gun. I knew it.

“I’m good. Just...” I gestured down at my leg.

Cord took his hand away, and I missed the warmth.

“Sorry.”

“No. Crap. I’m sorry. It’s just—” *Don’t say it, don’t say it, don’t.* “I really like you and—” I pointed to my crotch. “I don’t want to go into the place—you know...”

If I wasn’t driving I would have hit my head on the steering wheel. Repeatedly.

“Oh. Oh!” Cord grinned and put his hand back.

Neither of us spoke for a few minutes, but it didn’t matter because we were at the restaurant. Things would be better now, and I’d stop making a big deal out of small things.

“Looks good.” Cord took my hand and led me inside.

I hoped my palm wasn't sweating. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I could do this.

“I hope you like it. It's one of my favorite places, but I don't go out a lot.”

“I'm sure I'll love it.” Cord squeezed my hand.

The hostess sat us down at a big table with the grill in the middle. There were a few other people around it, but we had one side to ourselves. We could have gone to a booth, but I liked the grill and watching them cook. It was fascinating. Like a dinner and a show.

Cord rolled up the sleeves on his green, checkered shirt. He had nice forearms. I licked my lips and he caught me staring. I bit my lip and looked into his eyes, leaning forward when the waitress stepped up to the table. The attraction between us was strong, but it would have to wait. I wanted to know how his lips would taste and I wanted his strong hands to touch me all over. And I was getting hard again. I blinked and got my mind back on focus.

I ordered a drink, and we went ahead and let the waitress know what we'd like for dinner. There wasn't much to the menu.

“Um—next time we'll have to get a booth and eat the sushi. It's really good, but this meal is very filling.”

“I love sushi; it's a date.” Cord winked at me.

“We haven't even finished this one.”

“Doesn't matter. I know I'll want many, many more dates with you.” Cord bumped our shoulders together.

I finally started to relax. He wanted another date with me. *Me*. It helped that Cord was very easy to talk to and we seemed to share a taste in music and movies.

Before I knew it, the food was being cooked. The chef was tossing food and chopping it all up. The flame was high and hot; it helped cover the flush I had gathering. I was ready for more than food. I was ready for Cord. Naked in my bed. For now, I pushed my plate forward for the fried rice and waited for my steak to be finished. The food was good, the company better.

Present Day

“That was a great first date. Still one of my favorite restaurants.”

“Good, we’re going there for lunch today.” Cord rolled us so he was on top of me.

I cradled his face in my hands.

“Sounds like a plan.” I ran a finger over his lips. God, I loved this man.

He made me a better person. I still did silly stuff, but now I didn’t worry because Cord loved me because of my silly quirks.

“Maybe we can relive that kiss.” Cord rubbed our noses together.

“Nothing will ever compare to the first time you kissed me.” I stared deep into his eyes and rocked my hips into his.

“I kissed you? I think you’ve got that backwards. I believe you *attacked me*.”

“What?” I wrestled with Cord, laughing.

Not that I could move him, but I knew his weakness. I tickled him. Ran my hands up his side and dug into his sensitive spot. He squirmed around the bed until finally he was at my mercy.

“Now—who kissed who?” I grinned down at him.

Three Years Ago

Dinner had been nice. One of the better ones I’d had in—well, awhile. I don’t date much because I worry too much about what people will think. Now I was relaxed. The couple of beers at dinner had helped. I’m a lightweight. I parked the SUV and took off my seatbelt, turning toward Cord.

“I had a great time. Thanks for asking me out.” I messed around with the seatbelt, not looking at Cord.

Would we kiss? Should I just shake his hand and go? It had been so long, I didn’t know the protocol. I could invite him in for coffee. I was more than ready to get a little bit physical.

“Me too. So—are you free tomorrow?” Cord had his hand under my chin and forced me to look up.

It was dark in the car, the streetlights throwing a soft glow. It was almost like we were in another world. I licked my lips and he was staring at them. I leaned forward. It was going to happen. Cord brushed our lips together; all the while his fingers gripped my face as if he was afraid I would move. I had no plans on that. I shifted into a better position and pressed our lips tighter together, licking at the seam of Cord's mouth. I wanted inside. He must have had the same intent because soon we were dueling with our tongues. I'd push into his mouth and he'd push back into mine. I moaned and melted against the seat, the middle console pushing into my skin.

I grabbed the back of his head and tried to pull him over into my seat.

"Shit, shit." Cord was struggling.

I didn't want him to go away, but he was soothing me.

"It's okay, Quinn. Stupid seatbelt."

It hit me then what had happened. He'd still been buckled into his seat and I'd forced him closer to me.

"Sorry. Sorry."

"No, don't be sorry." Cord rubbed my lips.

My cock was so hard. I wanted us both naked.

"I had a really great time. Tomorrow, we'll do it again." And Cord was out of the car.

I think I whimpered.

Present Day

"You're just lucky you texted me before I got out of the car." I smiled down at him fondly. "And I think that first kiss was both of us."

"That kiss scared me. I knew right then I'd fall in love with you and it wouldn't be a hard fall."

"You say the sweetest things."

"And I mean every single one of them."

"I know," I whispered against his lips.

There was no mistaking the love between us. That was love's first kiss, and I would forever remember it. And we'd have another first tonight when I asked

him to marry me. It might not be legal in Indiana—yet. But he was going to be mine forever so we could continue to share every first we could.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” I closed my eyes and snuggled. I didn't want to move from that spot. I loved remembering everything about our many firsts.

Tomorrow we would have another. He was giving me my first tattoo. Cord had finally talked me into it. We still had many more firsts to come.

The End

Author Bio

I wanted to be the youngest romance author published, but life impeded the dreams. I put my writing aside and went to college briefly, then enlisted in the Air Force. After serving in the military, I returned home to Indiana to start my family. A few years later, I discovered yahoo groups and book reviews. There was no turning back. I was bit by the writing bug.

I enjoy spending time with my son when not writing and love to receive reader feedback. I'm addicted to the internet so feel free to email me anytime.

Contact & Media Info

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MAD PASSION

By Naaju Rorrete

Photo Description

Two young, handsome men kissing against the background of a summer day in the woods, while one of them is carrying the other in his arms.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The guys in this photo have come to a big revelation, and they could not contain themselves. Perhaps they have finally figured out their feelings for each other, or perhaps the one who's picking the other guy up has finally proposed on this fine Summer day, after all that they had gone through. I just want a story about how they came to be at this point in time. I don't care if the story is sad or happy, I just want a happy ending.

Sincerely,

Angela S.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: enemies to lovers, first time, construction, banker, homophobia, sexual repression, anger issues, hurt/comfort, family, men with kids, crazy ex, hurricane

Word Count: 41,835

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Group members were asked to write a story prompt inspired by a photo of their choice. Authors of the group selected a photo and prompt that spoke to them and wrote a short story. The result is that there are nearly two hundred M/M stories available and free. Joining the group will allow you to read all those stories and much more, but mainly, you will find like-minded friends.

MAD PASSION

By Naaju Rorrete

Chapter 1

Brigantine Island, New Jersey, on the afternoon before the storm.

The familiar shore scenery disappeared as Travis drove like crazy, risking a speeding ticket because he was so late that Nadine, his babysitter, would get upset with him again, and she would charge double for the last extra hour.

Maybe he should marry her; she flirted with him all the time, and she was good with his kids.

Only problem, she was sort of the high maintenance type in more ways than financially, and he—well, he had too many issues to deal with lately.

Simply having someone to look after his kids wasn't a good motive to offer marriage to her, right? Travis hoped that she'd understand that he had a long day at work because they were getting ready for the incoming storm.

Oh. Damn. Speaking of which, he'd forgotten again to go to the grocery store before coming home. And doing shopping with the children always had been...

His car's wheels skidded loudly against the sidewalk as he abruptly stopped behind the vehicle parked in his driveway. Travis had already made the turn to park and almost hit the van, too caught up in his thoughts to notice the intruder's vehicle in there.

"Who parked that dirty van in my driveway?" He looked around for a few seconds and saw a man standing next to Nadine on his front porch. It seemed that she had just finished serving him a glass of ice tea. Adding injury to offense, that person was drinking his hard-earned ice tea. Like money grew on trees.

Visibly tattooed and disheveled, he fit the profile of an intruder in Travis's book, because the man looked like the robbers who raided the bank where Travis worked. It had been the scariest experience in Travis's whole life—one he was still trying to overcome—and this was simply the drop that made his cup overflow. It had been a very stressful day, after all.

Travis got out of the car in berserker mode, while his kids ran to meet him, jumping with happiness.

"Daddy's home," announced his eldest son, while his baby girl ran to him exclaiming, "Daaddy!"

But Travis was so upset that he didn't hug his kids like he usually did when he came home, and simply patted the children's heads. Seeing them normally had the effect of calming him down, but today it hadn't worked. So, still boiling inside, he picked up his little girl and kissed her, but immediately left her on the porch and kept walking toward the couple, followed by his three children.

Defiant, Travis stood in front of the man, who stopped drinking and mechanically handed the glass to Nadine without taking his brown eyes off him. Travis asked in a brusque manner, "What the heck do you think you are doing?"

Regardless of his condescending tone, listening to him shook Joe in an unexpected way. He felt that the world stopped, or rather started going in slow motion, because his voice touched him right through to his soul, and Joe got the impression of meeting his fate, even if he didn't know if it was going to be for bad or good. His instinct told him as much, before his mind took over and reality hit him. That type of thing didn't happen, at least, not to guys like him.

Nadine had warned him a few seconds ago that *The Psycho* had arrived. She'd also told him that he hadn't always been like that; all the weird behavior started after his wife's death. Travis had gone from depressed and grief-stricken to short-tempered and rude. Nobody ever knew what he would say or do next.

A pity, according to the friendly babysitter—because he was so handsome. Joe silently agreed with her.

The angry man standing in front of them looked like an angel.

On second thought, with his lean muscular body, he seemed more like an archangel or a fallen angel. Yeah, an angel with an evil calling. Joe found himself staring in awe at the impeccably dressed man, who looked as if he had walked out of a men's fashion magazine.

"Who do you think you are, eh? My driveway isn't a public parking lot." An index finger was waggled in his face, and somehow Joe found it more funny than offensive.

Knowing that he had to say something, he admitted, "I'm sorry. I thought that I had left enough space for another car. I will move my vehicle to the street as soon as you move yours."

"Move it? You must leave at once." The finger now pointed to the road.

Joe couldn't help it and smiled while asking, "You are Travis, right? If that is true, then I have an appointment with you." Joe paused and stared at him before adding, "For which you are already late."

Still wary, the other man narrowed his eyes. "And you are?"

"Joe from The Handyman."

Because of the brief expression that crossed Travis's face—apparently he'd forgotten the appointment—Joe added, "I'm here to do the estimate for the home repairs, and, as you urgently requested, to board up windows before the storm."

To Joe's surprise, Travis looked him up and down and said, "I asked for a professional person, and they sent me—" he waved a hand before adding, "you."

Joe started, "Travis, if I offended you by—"

But he was quickly interrupted. "For you, I am Mr. Anderson."

"Really?" *Was this guy for real? Keeping distances and things like that?*

Joe breathed and made his last attempt to save the potential business transaction. "Mr. Anderson, what—according to you—is so wrong with me?"

"What is so wrong about you?" He again looked Joe up and down. "What isn't? Look at yourself, your tattoos and that tacky earring, besides dressing like a bum." Then he narrowed his eyes and asked, "Are you an ex-convict?"

Okay, even if they needed this contract, Joe had his limits, and this was it; he was going to get out of there this very moment, because the guy was truly insane. "Mr. Anderson, no, I've never been arrested. This is The Handyman's summer uniform, and this was my last appointment of the day. So yes, I have some paint and dust on my uniform, but I'm not dirty." Joe breathed deep and his eyes met the blue ones as he added, "And my tattoos and earring are a very personal thing."

Travis raised a brow while he stared at him with a doubtful expression. Absentmindedly, he extended his arm, took the glass from Nadine's hands and drank the ice tea that Joe had left, but when he realized what he had done, he quickly spat any liquid still in his mouth onto the grass.

He gave the glass back to Nadine, who looked at Joe with an *I told you so* wide-eyed expression, before picking up the little girl in her arms, saying, "I'll be inside. It's time for the kids to have their snacks."

Without taking his eyes from Joe's face, Travis agreed with her. "Please do. I'm paying you double for the whole hour, anyway."

"Yes, you are," she said and, rolling her eyes, entered the house. The other two children followed, after staring at their father for a few seconds, as if they wished to say something, but wouldn't dare. Joe assumed they were about eight or nine years old.

Once the children were inside the house, Joe said, "You're fast to see others' flaws, but what is wrong with you? Spitting like that is truly bad manners."

Travis seemed genuinely surprised by the question. "Are you serious? With my luck, I could get one of your STDs."

Joe could hardly believe it. "Mr. Anderson, I'm not sick, so don't worry, you won't get infected with anything."

Travis's expression was even more annoyed than before. "I doubt it. You look like the type of person who would be intimate with anybody without thinking. Like a savage urban beast."

Joe might have lost his time, but he wasn't going away before telling this guy a couple of things. Especially because his gaydar had started going off like crazy. He promised himself that one day Travis was going to drink more than his saliva, and that thought gave him an idea. So aloud, he informed him, "I always use protection and I don't swallow, no matter how clean the guy says he is."

"What did you just say?" Now Travis was truly outraged.

"You heard me, and don't act as if you don't know what the hell I'm talking about." For the first time since they were talking, Joe felt he had the upper hand. "You see, you don't have a monopoly on insulting people you don't know, judging simply by the way they look, or by assuming the wrong ideas."

"I don't think I'm wrong about you." Travis glared at him obnoxiously. They were about the same height, but Joe was stronger.

"Well, allow me to return the favor." He gave him a once-over, slow and offensive, head-to-toe, and when his eyes met the blue ones again he said, "You, Mr. Anderson, are very sexually repressed and frustrated."

"How dare you!"

“You started the profiling, remember?” Joe paused to see the effect of his words and when he confirmed that they had distressed Travis, continued, “And the worst is that no woman will ever satisfy you, because what you need is a man, Mr. Anderson.”

When Travis opened his mouth and no sound came out, Joe added, “And I’m sure you would love to have intercourse with a savage urban beast.” Stepping closer until only a few inches separated them, he concluded, “And that is what you really have against me—the fact that I remind you of your carnal instincts.”

When he had argued with other guys in the past, stepping this close had sent those guys running. But to his surprise, Travis not only stood his ground, but also furiously asked, “Do you want a piece of me?” He stepped backward, but only to remove his suit jacket and tie, placing them over the porch fence. Shirtsleeves rolled up, he confronted Joe again.

All the while, Joe observed, fascinated by the body that the white shirt displayed rather than covered. “A piece? No way. If you weren’t such a hypocritical bigot, I would take all of you.”

In that instant, Travis attempted to punch him, but Joe easily dodged the blow. Frustrated, Travis launched himself again.

Joe smirked. “Speaking of all of you—literally.”

They struggled on for a few seconds, but then separated, looking at each other and heaving. Then, as if he hadn’t had enough, Travis abruptly lunged again, and once more Joe stopped the attack easily, but for a moment held the other man in his arms and against his chest. Travis elbowed him in the side and somehow they ended up rolling over the grass, until they rolled under a bush that stopped their movement.

The guy truly wanted to fight, but that was the last thing on Joe’s mind. Having Travis’s lean, muscular frame pinned down under his own, Joe imagined for a second how it would be to kiss that impertinent mouth, or trace every inch of that body with the tip of his tongue.

Travis tried taking the upper hand, but Joe kept him in place while whispering, “Didn’t you ever hear of make love, not war?”

The next struggle brought their faces together. Joe touched his lips to Travis’s on a whim.

Travis simply gazed at him open-mouthed. Lowering his head, Joe took Travis's lips with his. Travis opened his mouth to oppose it and it was his downfall. Joe kissed him as much as he wished, first using only his lips, as tender as he could, later sucking his tongue, playing with it. Neither of them closed their eyes.

During the whole kiss, Joe was looking into Travis's eyes, trying to read his real feelings. He could feel Travis's body trembling and upset against him, and he could also smell his scent. It was a nice one, in spite of Travis perspiring. It was a unique mix of Travis's own scent and a trace of cologne, which he had probably applied that morning after he'd showered.

A shower—for a moment Joe had a vision of both of them taking a shower together, and when his body started to react, Joe released Travis as fast as he could. Rolling back into the garden, Joe stood and distracted himself by dusting the soil from his clothes.

Travis joined him a few seconds later, shaking his head in disbelief and saying, "You are truly gay. And I thought you were simply trying to insult me when you said those things about what you do with men."

They were both trying to catch their breath after the short struggle, and Joe replied, "I've never met a fake gay in my life, just a bunch of those who are in deep denial, like you."

Travis shook his head. "You not only insulted me, you took advantage of me. Those people at The Handyman are going to hear from me. I will contact the president of the company, I will file a complaint. I—"

Joe was shocked by his words, but not hurt. For some reason he couldn't take him seriously. Not yet.

"Please, Mr. Anderson, calm down, I apologize if I made you upset in any way."

"Too late for apologies, because I'm going to file that complaint."

"Do you have something against gay people?"

"No, but it's the type of person like you, who makes every gay out there look bad—"

Joe interrupted him. "Again, you are judging me without knowing who I am. I'm a hardworking person, who supports his family."

In that instant the two older boys came running onto the porch again. They were looking at the men with concern, especially the one who seemed the older. Nadine followed them, carrying the girl.

“You’re married?” It sounded as if Travis couldn’t imagine a human being willing to do such a thing with Joe.

“No, I’m single. But I’m responsible for my family. And I can assure you that my mother would take offense at your wrong opinion of me.”

“Poor woman. I can only imagine what she has been through with you.”

“Yes, my poor mother. She has suffered so much.” Joe would never know what impulse had him admitting that, but somehow he wanted this person to know that he was being unfair, so looking into Travis’s eyes, he explained, “My father is dying of cancer. My sister is still in college and working part-time, and I am the only one working full-time in the family, but I will be fired because of your customer complaint.”

Everything he’d said was true, except he couldn’t be fired from his own business.

Once again, he’d wasted his time, because Travis didn’t buy his explanation.

“Lies. You will not make me change my opinion of you. I will file a complaint, not only with your company, but with the Division of Consumer Affairs.”

The man was impossible. Joe knew that Travis was not yet a customer, so complaining to the Division of Consumer Affairs would go nowhere. He gave Travis a last look and headed toward his van. The man really looked and tasted great; what a shame he was a little wacko.

Joe placed his hand on the door handle and heard Travis asking, “Where do you think you are going? I didn’t say you could go.”

“Bossy, aren’t we?” For a moment, Joe wished he were into leather, to dare to tie Travis to a bed and do things to him until he’d admit his true nature and deepest desires. He bet that would work wonders—much better than electroshock.

“I’ll be right back,” he said over his shoulder, and pushing his silly fantasies aside, he reached out for the family pictures he’d printed a couple of weeks ago. He’d framed the pictures side-by-side, and every time he’d regretted quitting

his corporate job to come to his hometown, taking over his family's business, he would take a long look at the photographs.

Joe instantly cooled down, and raised his eyes to look at the beach that was only a block away from the house, the waves crashing higher and faster reminding him of the incoming storm and the many pending tasks he still had. He stood in front of Travis and handed him the picture holder. "Here. Please take a look at these. I'm not lying."

Travis took the frame from him without a word and looked at it, while Joe explained, "This is a picture of my family when I was a kid, and this is the most recent picture of us—I took it last week. I wanted it as a reminder of why I'm doing this job and putting up with people like you."

"Can I see the picture, Dad?" asked the older of the two boys.

Travis leaned forward so the kids could see the picture, and Joe standing next to them elaborated a little more. "That is my dad, before and after he got sick. He worked so hard all his life for us, but now it's my turn. Please give me another chance, Mr. Anderson."

Chapter 2

Travis's mind and feelings were all over the place; he had gone from furious to shocked. A man kissed him and he allowed this to happen. Twice. The first kiss had taken him by surprise. But he remembered clearly, the moment when Joe faced him, right before the second kiss. He'd breathed the same air, he perceived the desire in Joe's eyes, he saw his mouth closing in on his, and he could have stopped him. He had been unable to resist the curiosity of knowing the taste of another man.

Making an effort, he took a careful look at the pictures in front of him. The first one was a happy family, and the second was of the same family, except the father was wearing an oxygen mask, and he looked so different from the one before—kind of worn out.

One thing caught his attention, in spite of whatever they were enduring: all of them were smiling, and the scene had a sense of family love that Travis had known when his wife had been alive. They were a happy couple that succeeded in making a happy family too. It had been their childhood dream, both coming from foster homes and having never met their biological families. He felt the sadness taking a grip of him, like it did every time he remembered Sophia. Before nostalgia became obvious to the man in front of him, he centered his attention on the present.

He silently returned the photographs and tried to look at the man with a different attitude. He needed to work more on his compassion.

How could have this stranger have guessed his innermost feelings? His weakness?

The intruder was wrong about one thing. Although Travis had spent most of his adult life hiding his attraction to men, he didn't like the average type of man Joe was; the rough around the edges sort had never interested him.

Because Joe was average in every possible way—from his height to his appearance—yet for some unknown reason, Travis was having a hard time taking his eyes off him. His attraction to men had been more like admiration for the way they looked, or in the case of some of his professors, how smart they were. Travis had never experienced the raw sexual energy that pulled him to Joe. He shook off the thought emphatically; never again would he allow himself to think this way. He knew better than that, he was stronger than that.

The guy was almost his own height, but stronger, and obviously a street fighter. And so infuriating.

What the heck was he thinking picking a fight with someone like that? He could have ended up on the grass, beaten and humiliated in front of the kids. His sons. He glared back at the bushes Joe and he had been under when Joe kissed him; there was no way the kids could have seen them from the deck, but they must have seen when he had thrown himself against the man. Now, they were looking at him in silence. He saw concern in their eyes; a sight he had not seen since their mother passed away. In that moment, Travis despised Joe even more.

“You scared my kids,” he accused him point-blank.

Joe frowned, and for a moment Travis expected him to contradict his accusation, but instead the man addressed the kids directly and said, “I’m sorry, children. I didn’t mean it.”

He ended his words by giving them one of his easy smiles—the guy smiled all the time, apparently.

The boys smiled back at him and switched to what Travis called their “team mode”—they would join forces for a cause that they thought was worthy, and usually that meant against Travis. God help him.

“It’s okay, Joe. We were watching from the window, and saw how Dad attacked you,” Travis heard Edward, his older son, saying.

“What?” Travis looked at his sons in astonishment.

His younger son, Richard, explained, “Our Dad is short-tempered, and he misunderstood. We want to apologize for the way he behaved toward you, and we would appreciate it if you reconsider fixing our home.”

They were taking turns speaking, like a team, as usual. For Travis, it was a double vision of a younger version of himself—judging him. At least, they sounded like his children, polite and well spoken. But wait—that last part Travis strongly disagreed with.

“Wait, children. What are you saying? This person is not welcome around here.”

Edward replied, “He’s done nothing wrong, Dad. And he already apologized for parking on your driveway and now that everything is clarified, maybe you can let him do what he came here to do.”

Joe smiled again briefly at the kids, but put on his most serious face when Travis looked back at him. Travis felt like telling him, *I saw that, you hypocrite*. But before he could say anything else, he felt Richard discreetly elbowing his side. “Now it’s your turn.”

“For what?” Travis was still trying to figure out what they were trying to do. How was it possible that they seemed to like this person?

Edward patiently explained, “You owe Joe an apology. Remember the other day at school?”

Oh, Lord. His kids were feeding him with his own medicine. He made them apologize to the kid who they alleged was bullying them. Well, he had no choice, unless he shared with them why he found this intruder so disturbing and annoying—something he himself wasn’t comfortable even thinking about.

“Dad? We are waiting.”

Travis sighed. “Fine. Mr...?” *Gosh*. He didn’t even know the guy’s last name.

“You can call me Joe.” There was no smile for him, Travis found out.

“Whatever. If I was rude, please accept my apologies, Joe.” He managed to get those words out of him.

“Apology accepted,” Joe nodded.

The kids seemed pleased with what their joint effort had accomplished. Travis felt ashamed of his behavior; lately he’d been losing his patience too often. He had been so rude, and so insulting. It was as if he wanted Joe to hate him deeply.

“What about the job, Mr. Anderson?” Joe asked, looking directly at him.

Travis felt those unwelcome feelings again. He had struggled with these feelings for years. They were his shame, his reason to feel less than others, and this man disturbed him. It was worse than he had first thought. He liked what he felt in his arms. It was crazy, but he did.

For a moment, he wanted to stay there forever. Protected, accepted, and when the forced embrace ended, he read the passion in Joe’s eyes, and it scared him. Never before had he been in another man’s arms; he’d never dared, and when he hurled himself at him, his intention was to hit him, never expecting the guy knew how to grasp him in a wrestler’s move.

Travis couldn't hold Joe's stare. Avoiding his eyes, he answered, "I won't file a complaint yet, but I will think about it. And I'll call you to let you know my decision."

"No problem. Can you please move your car, so I can leave?"

Without saying anything, Travis walked to his car and moved it out of the way. Meanwhile Nadine, who had stayed silent during the whole confrontation, followed Joe. And now what? Was Travis going to lose his babysitter to this person too? He stood by his car, looking at them and making an effort not to say anything.

"Can you please give me a ride, Joe?" It sounded like she was asking for a date, and Joe could see Travis's mean expression, while waiting for his answer. Maybe he was wrong and the guy didn't belong to his team, or played for both teams. Whatever it was, Travis clearly didn't like him being friendly with the young and pretty babysitter.

For a second, Joe considered giving her the ride simply to bother Travis, but he had met his share of girls like Nadine, who wouldn't understand that he wasn't into anything but friendship with them. So he said, "I'm sorry, miss, but it is against the company rules to drive non-employees."

She pouted and whispered, "I see."

Joe gave her one of his charming smiles as consolation and left. He drove mechanically toward his home, but couldn't stop playing the whole incident over and over in his mind.

He could not believe it yet. The first person in such a long time that he'd found himself truly drawn to had to be so weird. And if that wasn't enough, he had to look so much like Matt. But at least thinking about Matt didn't hurt—not the way it used to. To forget about it, he recalled the glance he took at Travis's chest while they were wrestling; the man had soft hair in the center, unlike Matt, who hardly had any hair anywhere. *Damn Matt.*

Joe made an effort to remember Travis again, how he felt under him, and the tenderness of his mouth. And yes, he had pinkish nipples. "Huh. I wonder if everything else is as pinkish..."

"There you are. Are you okay?"

He jumped in his seat, startled by his sister. All of a sudden, he realized he was parked outside his parents' house. Today he was more distracted than usual, but at least he managed to get home without causing an accident.

"Joe, I've been calling your cell all afternoon," Mary said, staring at him as if she doubted he was truly all right.

"You won't believe the day I had." He got out of the van and started to tell her. "My cell drowned in a toilet and my last..." He hesitated and quickly asked, "Mary, is there something wrong with Dad?"

"No. Dad is fine. It's worse—well for you, it will be worse. Come with me."

He followed her to the side of the house. From there, they could see the deck, where his parents were seated. His father was reading the paper, while his mother was sitting next to a handsome young man, who was laughing at something she had said.

"Matt is here," Mary announced unnecessarily and with a theatrical tone. Joe hid the expression of pain and focused on what she was saying. "I came out here to intercept you. It's your choice. You can run away now, or confront him. I suggest you disappear, and I'll make something up."

"I'm not running away. This is my hometown. He's the one who has to leave. Besides, I'm not going to leave you all alone with that storm coming," Joe said, fast recovering from the bad surprise.

"Joey, he's not playing games. He told me clearly that he needs you by his side, and he won't stop until you are back in his life."

"He can't make me go with him, don't worry. I will be fine."

They started walking toward the house, side by side. It was a big property, which originally had been a farm that his father had later adapted into a compound, where he hoped his two children would live with their children. The main house stood in front of two smaller houses, one on each side, the three houses linked by a pathway, with a patio in the middle.

"Matt bought the property next to ours, Joey," Mary said.

"Excuse me?" Joe stopped abruptly.

"I heard him telling Mom about it."

Joe shook his head. "When will he accept that we're done? Mary, I'm going to tell Mom the truth about Matt and me."

“Wait. Think of Dad. Please don’t. Mom thinks that the only good influence you have in your life is Matt McAlester—she even brags about it to her friends, about how we are acquaintances with the McAlesters.”

Joe closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. When he inhaled, he caught Travis’s scent. It was probably his imagination, or maybe the place on his own shirt where he had held him. Truth be told, the cologne the guy used had a lingering effect.

“Mary, I met someone today.”

“A guy?”

She still asked this question every time, even if she had been the first one to know Joe was gay. He wondered if deep down, his sister, like his mother and father, kept hoping for a miracle—that he wasn’t gay after all. One day they would have to give up those false expectations. He’d never dated a girl in his life, and got out of the closet as soon as he had known where the door was.

“Sure, it’s a guy, Mary. It won’t be easy though, but he will give me the strength to resist Matt.”

“What are you talking about, Joey? Did you bump your head or something?”

“No. The guy is a little crazy. The most beautiful nutcase I’ve ever met, and of course, he thinks of himself as straight.”

Mary was speechless for a few seconds, and when she finally said something, it was, “And you, my dear brother, are a masochist.” She made that funny gesture with her mouth and nose that signaled she thought Joe was responsible for anything that went wrong, and said, “I hope it’s not Mr. Anderson you’re talking about, Joe.”

“Do you know him?” Oh, no. If the guy was a friend of one of Mary’s friends, he would never hear the end of it.

“Not really. I made the appointment and spoke with him when he called. Someone at his workplace recommended us to him.”

“Jesus. This might cost us two customers instead of one.”

“What did you do, Joe? How many times do I need to tell you that the customer is always right?”

“The only thing I did, which I appreciate can be maddening for some, is that I parked on his driveway. And I apologized for it, but he said a bunch of insulting things to me, and my gaydar—”

“Your what? Not again, Joey, please? We agreed that you would ignore other people’s sexuality, especially if they’re customers.”

“I know, but in this case I couldn’t help myself, when he—”

Mary raised a hand to interrupt him. “In this case, your intuition might cost us a lot, because Mr. Anderson is the new general manager at our bank—the person who approves the commercial lines of credit.”

“Fuck.” Joe usually avoided saying the “F word” in front of her, because like when they were kids, she would feel free to repeat it.

“Yes, you fucked the chance of getting a new contract.” She pointed at him and kept walking toward the house.

Joe followed her, thinking that fucking Mr. Anderson might be worth losing two contracts, but knowing his very life might be at risk, he kept that thought for himself. She continued talking in the same way she did when she was mad at him. That girl never learned who was the big brother.

“Let’s hope he doesn’t feel aggravated by your treatment of him. Now, we must find a way to fix this mess. I’ll call him first thing in the morning and see if he would agree to have someone else from our company doing this job for him.”

“Please do. If he’s the person who has to approve the credit line for the solar energy project, we’re doomed.”

“Thanks to you.”

Joe nodded, showing all the remorse he was capable of in his expression, but remembering the stolen kiss. *Yeah, they were truly doomed.* He continued walking next to Mary. She was great at dealing with people, unlike him. Joe was counting the days until she finished school and started working full-time at The Handyman.

“Let’s go. The sooner we get rid of Matt, the better. We still have a lot to do to get ready for the storm.”

The storm.

Suddenly, Joe remembered that Travis and his family lived right in front of the beach. He didn’t have the opportunity to do an inspection of their house, but

he was sure that it would not withstand a superstorm, like the one the weather forecast had been talking about during the past week.

Joe hoped that Travis had the common sense to listen to the storm evacuation orders issued for people who lived by the shore.

Chapter 3

When he saw Joe, Matt almost ran to him. That was the first thing Joe noticed. The second thing was that time had made Matt better looking, if that were possible. Joe observed his former lover hesitate, as he realized the smile Joe gave him had been only on behalf of his parents, and it didn't reach his eyes.

"Matt, what a surprise." Joe tried to hide how unpleasant it was. Next, Joe kissed his mother on the cheek, patted his father's shoulder, and on purpose stayed a few feet away from his so-called friend.

"Well, since you're always so busy, I decided to visit your parents, knowing that sooner or later, you'd show up," Matt said.

Joe truly hoped the day couldn't get worse, because after ten months of avoiding Matt, in every possible way, he now stood in front of him.

The way he looked him up and down, told Joe that Matt still found him attractive and, like Travis, he disapproved of Joe's work uniform.

Joe's mother, Christine, stood next to her son's friend. "I've invited Matt for dinner, Joe," she said.

"Really? Then, I'll see you at dinnertime, Matt." And without any further delay, Joe headed toward his own house. He heard his mother call after him.

"Dinner will be served in an hour, Joe."

"Yes, Mom. I'll be right back, I'm only going to take a shower."

He had barely looked at Matt before leaving the deck and crossing the pathway to his place. Joe hoped that it would be enough for Matt to understand that they were history.

Once inside his room, while removing his clothes, Joe couldn't help but recall their story. He and Matt had met at the expensive college his mother insisted in sending him to. On that very first encounter Joe fell in love with Matt; apparently, he had a thing for good-looking, sophisticated men.

They had been assigned different roommates, but Matt found a way to move in with Joe by changing places with Joe's roommate. He'd probably used his money and influence to achieve that. And he had been the one who had seduced

Joe first, too. Matt's fragile appearance was misleading, because he was really a tough person—someone who would manipulate the world to his own benefit.

Matt's voice always had the right tone. Never shouting or cursing; a beautiful voice, even when lying.

When they graduated from school, they'd moved together into a nice co-op in Manhattan, and Joe got his dream job at a Wall Street brokerage firm, while Matt had a decorative position in his family business, and for a few years, they'd been a very happy couple.

But there were a lot of lies between them, all on Matt's part.

The first couple of times he'd been unfaithful, Joe hadn't been able to prove it, but by the third time, there was no way to deny it. Joe had found Matt in their own bed with some random guy, and it had been the end of their romance, at least for Joe. Matt had never given up trying to get Joe's forgiveness and another chance for their relationship.

That horrible day, Joe didn't know how he had been able to walk around their apartment, gathering only his most essential stuff, while Matt followed him in disbelief, asking for Joe to wait and talk about what had happened, saying that Joe would not survive without him. But he had.

He'd come back to his hometown of Galloway, New Jersey. His return had coincided with his father being diagnosed with cancer, and Joe forgot all about working on Wall Street, and took over the family business. What he'd learned from his father while growing up ended up being more useful than anything he'd been taught at school.

But it had been harder than Joe could have ever anticipated, when he discovered the corruption going on inside his own company, where the foremen were stealing materials and reselling them.

Keeping that from his father had been the most difficult task, because some of the people Joe had to fire had been working with his dad for years, and the deception could have affected his father's health. After the business had been cleaned up, Joe put all his efforts into improving The Handyman, turning it into a highly successful construction company. Part of it had been luck, because the timing was right—the real estate industry had started to revive. The other part was Joe working seven days a week, twelve- and fourteen-hour shifts, during the last ten months.

Joe got under the shower, having the coldest water he could handle running over him.

“I hate you, damn it. Matt, I really hate you,” he muttered as he left the bathroom wrapped only in a towel. He picked up the T-shirt he had just taken off, shaking it to get the dust off, before putting it in the laundry hamper, and he again smelled Travis’s cologne. He hugged the shirt against his face and let himself fall onto the bed.

I’m acting like a teenager, but Travis hates me.

All of a sudden he felt so tired. He looked at the clock next to his bed; he could afford a twenty-minute nap before dinnertime.

Joe had never felt more relaxed in his life. He wished to continue sleeping forever, but the warm hands touching his body in the darkness were hard to ignore, and the mouth that met his own in a deep kiss slowly awakened him. At first, he thought he was in the middle of a wet dream, and the owner of those hands and mouth was the man he’d craved all afternoon. When the hot mouth went downward, kissing his neck and chest, Joe whispered, “Travis...”

The contact ceased and a painfully familiar voice asked, “Who is Travis?”

Joe scooted in the bed and lit the side-table lamp, to find Matt kneeling in front of him. “Matt? How did you get in here?”

Matt sat on his haunches and gave him that dreamy-eyed gaze. “When you didn’t come to dinner, I volunteered to fetch you. The door was open, and you looked so tempting in here. It brought back so many memories.”

Joe was fully alert now. “Memories you’d better forget. Get out of my house and my life, Matt.”

“No, I’m sorry, Joe, but I can’t.” He moved closer and slipped his hand between Joe’s legs, easily removing the towel and grabbed Joe’s cock, which started to respond to the expert touch immediately.

“We’ve been through this, Matt. I forgive you, but I can’t forget. So please, don’t push it.”

“Why not? See, you need me.” Joe’s erection announced the months of abstinence, and the temptation to give up and forget what Matt had done was so strong.

Joe closed his eyes, and heard Matt saying, “All I ask is another chance, please?”

But when Matt leaned forward and kissed him, Joe recalled another kiss—the one he stole from Travis, and it was that mouth he craved. The image he thought long-forgotten replayed in his mind: Matt on their bed, legs spread wide-open while another guy fucked him. The nausea Joe felt that first time came back, and he pushed Matt so hard that he nearly fell off the bed.

“Hey! There’s no need to get physical with me. You’ve never been like that, not even…” He trailed off, obviously thinking of that day. “Joe, if you didn’t beat me that day, why would you do that now?”

Joe walked away from the bed and, pulling a drawer open, picked out underwear and a pair of sweatpants. While dressing himself, he said, “Matt, I don’t trust you. I will never be able to again, so get out of my life.”

Matt stood in front of him. “Is it because of this Travis person? Are you in a relationship with him?”

Matt finished putting on a T-shirt. If Matt believing he was in a relationship would send him away, so be it. “Yes,” he said.

“Who is he? Some Jersey boy?”

“That’s none of your fucking business,” Joe answered bitterly.

“It is my business, because he is standing between us.”

“Travis is the best thing that ever happened to me, don’t you dare to interfere.” Joe saw the pain in Matt’s eyes; lying about Travis was worth it.

Besides, the chance that those two would ever meet was so remote.

In fact, the chance he’d ever meet Travis again was zero. He walked out of his house, closely followed by Matt, who told him as he passed by, “I’m not going to give up on you that easy. You’ll see.”

And to Joe’s surprise, Matt continued walking toward the driveway and his car. Joe stood there, watching Matt drive away, until he heard Mary’s voice calling him from their parents’ front door.

“Joe, you’ve got to see this. Come on.”

He entered the house and didn’t need any more guidance to know what Mary wanted him to see. The widescreen TV that his parents and sister were watching displayed the images of the satellite profile of the storm.

Joe sat on a couch next to his mother. His father was on his recliner, where lately he spent most of the day. Mary stayed on her feet. By the way she paced

in front of them, Joe knew she was very excited. Maybe a little scared. “That thing is huge, Joey.”

“Yes. No wonder they’re calling it a superstorm. But we will be all right in here, Mary.”

“I told her that many times,” their father said. “If there is any place prepared for something like this, it is our home. Right, Joe?”

“Yes. I will be testing our solar panels’ power in an emergency for the first time.”

“I don’t know much about solar panels, but I think that you should take them down until it passes,” his dad suggested.

Joe thought about it; the panels were weatherproof, but maybe it was the best not to take any chances. It would mean a whole day of work to remove them and another day to put them back. In another time, he would have said *no way*, but he didn’t argue with his father anymore.

“I’ll do it tomorrow morning. We have time before it gets here, right?”

“About another day until it hits. There are mandatory evacuations at the shore,” his mother said.

At her words, Joe recalled Travis and his kids again.

“Why didn’t you wake me up for dinner?”

“I sent Matt to wake you. Where is he?”

Joe regretted asking, and answered her question with the first thing he could think of. “He had to leave in a rush, but he’ll be back.”

“Great. At least we’ll get a break from him,” Mary said as she sat next to Joe.

“What’s your problem with Matt?” their mother asked. “He’s been Joe’s best friend for years, but you never liked him.”

“I guess I don’t like certain types of people, Mom.”

Before they dragged him into the conversation, Joe headed for the kitchen and tried to get Mary out of trouble too. “I’m going to get something to eat and see what I can do tonight to prepare the house. Can you call Daniel and ask him if he can come over, Mary? I think that some of the construction materials in the warehouse will be safer if we keep them here inside the sheds.”

“Are you sure?” His father was questioning his reasoning again; having been an active man, it was hard to be only a witness.

“Yep. The office building might take more damage than here. Besides, the sheds here are strong enough to take that storm, but sadly not big enough to put all the stock in.”

His father nodded, satisfied, and Joe breathed, relieved. His old man had built those sheds decades ago; the fact that they were still useful contributed to making him feel useful as well.

Joe ate some leftovers, and a couple of hours later, he sat again in his parents' living room, with his mom, dad, Mary and Daniel, who was his assistant at the company, and also his future brother-in-law; he was going to marry Mary in a few months.

Joe noticed that his dad was falling asleep in his recliner, and his mother lowered the sound on the TV, before she placed a blanket on him. When she looked up, her eyes met Joe's. She smiled at him, but her eyes spoke of the sadness of losing her husband little by little.

Mary and Daniel were holding hands and whispering about their plans.

In that moment, Joe acknowledged that his family was all he cared about in this world, yet he also felt that something was missing from his life; or rather, someone. It was about time he found somebody to love again.

His mother sat next to him. “Why were you so cold with Matt?”

“We've changed, Mom. We don't have anything in common anymore.”

“That's sad, Joe, because Matt bought the property next to this one, hoping that you were going to renew your friendship.”

“I know. Mary told me.” The idea that she already knew the type of relationship he had with Matt, crossed his mind. There was the chance that Matt himself had told her the edited version of it, and one that favored Matt. Whatever it was, it wasn't going to work.

Joe felt grateful when Daniel interrupted: “Joe, some customer was calling for you until I left the office. He called like three times in less than an hour, asking for Mr. Joe.”

Joe felt a flutter of hope that it could be Travis, but waited for Daniel to finish.

“He was very concerned that ‘Mr. Joe and nobody else’ does the estimate for him. He also needs someone to board up his house. It’s urgent.”

“Mr. Joe? What is that about?” his mother asked. He suspected that she imagined there was more than a commercial interest in the frequent calls.

“I forgot to tell him my whole name, Mom. Daniel, please send somebody else. I’ll be busy tomorrow, checking the battery bank and taking down the solar panels. Yes, send Frank or Lou. They’re feeling better, right? I only went today because we didn’t have anybody available.”

“The guys will be back at work, but we have a problem, boss. Mr. Anderson doesn’t want anybody else but ‘Mr. Joe’.”

Joe smiled. *Really? Uh. He wants me.*

Mary waved a hand in front of his face. “Hey, big brother, what should Daniel do?”

“Yes, Joe, what should I do? He sounds like a difficult customer.”

“He is, you have no idea. But I think you’ll be able to handle it without conflict. You’ll have to, because I really can’t.” He wanted to see Travis again, but what if his attraction for the man grew and they never got anywhere? It wasn’t such a good idea to feel hope for something that would never happen.

“Okay. I’ll go, as everybody knows I like to do estimates so much,” Daniel said, the words full of irony.

“If you don’t want to do it, simply reschedule it for another day, maybe after the storm. In the meantime, send any of the crew to do the boarding up for him,” Joe suggested.

“By the way,” his mother interjected, “who’s going to do the boarding up in this house?”

“I’ll do it, Mom,” Joe volunteered.

Daniel placed his arm around Mary’s shoulders and said, “It’s settled. I’ll do the boarding up and the estimate for Mr. Anderson first thing in the morning, and later, I’ll come here to give you a hand with the solar panels and the supplies.”

“Sounds great. Ah—Daniel, don’t park in his driveway,” Joe warned him with a naughty smile.

“Why?”

“A long story, I’ll tell you about it some other time.” Yeah, he would tell him the censored version, without the stolen kiss.

Later, when Daniel left, Joe almost ran after him to tell him he would go instead. Why waste another chance to see Travis? But on the other hand, what was the point of seeing him again? The man was straighter than a candle, which he would love to heat until bending, but no, better not. Instead, he put all his thoughts into his new business plan. With the real estate industry still in crisis, he needed to change the goals of his company once more, and solar energy was the new road on which he was going to take the company forward.

Chapter 4

The next morning, Joe went to The Handyman's office to personally supervise that the supplies were stored in the safest location, and to take home with him what could be stored at the farm. He was getting ready to leave, leading a little caravan of pickup trucks, when he saw that Daniel had come back from Travis's home with a concerned face.

Joe couldn't imagine Travis having issues with Daniel. The man managed to keep his uniform clean, and didn't have any tattoos. Joe told the crew to wait, and entered his office, where Daniel and Mary were discussing something.

"What is it?" Joe asked squarely.

"That guy, Mr. Anderson, is on his way. He insisted it should be only you working at his property."

"Travis is coming here? Did you tell him who I was?" Joe could only imagine Travis's reaction when he found out the truth. Nothing good could come out of this.

"He was very concerned about you being fired, he said, and I'm quoting—no disrespect, Joe..." Daniel paused.

"Go ahead, what did he say?" Joe couldn't wait to hear Travis's most recent opinion of him.

"He said, 'If that punk got himself fired, I'll be in big trouble.' It took me a while to realize he was referring to you."

"So today, I'm a punk. Yesterday, I was a bum."

Mary laughed and Daniel joined her. The more indignant Joe's expression became, the harder they laughed.

"Anyway, I had to tell him that you were one of the owners," Daniel said. The phone rang, stopping him from explaining further. Mary picked it up and listened.

"Please, tell him we will see him shortly." She hung up and turned to Joe. "He's here."

Joe looked over at the security monitor on his desk. He could see Travis pacing anxiously in the small space of their front office. Mary leaned over and

said, “Oh my God, he is so cute. Joe, I would do anything to spend time with that guy.”

“I’m here, Mary. Show some respect for your fiancé,” Daniel told her without humor, and she laughed some more before saying, “I’m sorry, Daniel, but the guy is really hot.”

Joe didn’t know what to say for a few seconds, then he asked Daniel, “Did you do the estimate?”

“Yes. It took a lot of persuading, but I used the storm as a reason for having the estimate done today. The truth is that after the storm, we’ll be so busy that he would have to wait months. I also did the boarding up—I used marine plywood, but I don’t think it’ll be enough to protect his house from the storm.”

“Great argument,” Mary praised Daniel. “See, Joe? That’s one of the hidden talents of my Daniel.” Mary hugged her fiancé around the waist. Joe knew that she was trying to make the man forget her earlier comments, because Daniel had many qualities, but one enormous flaw: he was jealous to an extreme.

“Okay,” Joe agreed reluctantly. “I will see him. Please send him in, and Daniel, take the trucks home. I’ll meet you there as soon as I finish my talk with Mr. Anderson.” Daniel’s expression didn’t change. “Is there something else, Daniel?”

The man handed over the forms he used to gather the information about Travis’s home. Joe read them and frowned a couple of times. He looked at Daniel, surprised.

“What is it?” Mary asked.

Joe put the papers aside. “I can’t believe it. The house has so many violations that it’s impossible it passed an honest inspection of the Housing Department. The worst part is that the house is unstable.”

“But if they’re living in there, it must have passed the inspection, right? One needs a certificate of occupancy to move into Brigantine, and in order to give one of those out, the house must have been inspected recently.”

Daniel shook his head. “It depends on how he got to live in the house—if he moved in with someone who owned the property before, and that someone didn’t seek a occupancy certificate, for example.”

“Did you say anything, Daniel?” Joe asked.

“To Mr. Anderson? No. I wanted to discuss it with you first, but I asked him if he was going to obey the mandatory evacuation, and he is planning to stay there during the storm.”

“No way. He can't stay there,” Mary exclaimed.

And Joe, who since yesterday had been thinking about that, said, “I was afraid he would do something like that. He is a little snobbish, and going to a public shelter must be worse than dying.”

“Well, that's his choice, but what about the kids? Because he has kids, right?” Mary asked.

“Yes, he does. Three of them,” Joe found himself explaining.

“What are we going to do, Joe?” Mary frowned. “We can't simply forget about it, knowing that Mr. Anderson's house would probably collapse during the storm.”

Joe waved both hands in the air. “I'll do my best to explain the situation to him. Hopefully he'll understand the danger they're in.”

Daniel opened the door. “Okay. I'll send him in on my way out. I'll see you later.”

The couple was leaving together when Joe called out, “Mary, please stay with me.”

She turned around in awe. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” The temptation to see Travis alone was strong, but he needed to convince the man to find a safe place for his family during the storm, and being by themselves in the close space of an office would not help. Joe simply knew it wouldn't. Without his kids as witnesses, Travis might react worse than the previous day.

Mary kissed Daniel, and after he left, she faced her brother. “What's the deal, Joe? I thought you were dying to be alone with this guy.”

“I am. That's the problem. But as you know, this is an emergency, and I need your help. Please think of something.”

“Okay. This might be our chance to get in his good graces again.”

In that moment a knock was heard. “Please come in,” Joe called. The door opened. “Good morning, Mr. Anderson.” Joe sounded as professional as he

could, trying to ignore Travis's body and the memories of having him under him.

"You took a shower," was the first thing Travis said to him. And of course, that brought back fully his fantasies from the previous day. Thank God Mary was in the room.

"Yes, I must do that at least once a month," Joe answered with the same serious tone he used before. But when Mary discreetly nudged him, he quickly added, "Mr. Anderson, this is my sister, Mary Caprotti."

Travis turned and faced her with a courteous smile, which he hadn't shown yesterday. After sharing a brief handshake with Mary, he asked Joe, "So you would be Joe Caprotti?"

"No. My name is Giuseppe Caprotti, but I prefer being called Joe."

"Very Italian, indeed."

There was something between the lines in the way Travis said that, so Joe replied, "Yeah. Like many of us around here in South Jersey, but before you get any ideas, let me clarify that my family is originally from Naples, not Sicily."

"I wasn't going to say anything about it," Travis stated with a calm expression that Joe imagined he used most of the time. Otherwise, how could this person be the general manager of their regional bank? Joe decided to play along; maybe that credit line wasn't lost after all.

"How may I help you, Mr. Anderson?" Joe pointed to a chair next to the one in which Mary sat, observing both men in silence.

Travis hesitated for a few seconds, but sat down, as if what he came to say needed it. "It's my kids. They think you were fired because of me."

"Me? Fired? Why?"

"This morning, when the other person did the estimate and boarded up the house, they thought the worst."

"Speaking of which, are you going to leave the island?" Joe asked.

"No." Travis didn't look him in the eyes when he said so, but Joe knew he was deadly serious.

"No?" Joe stood behind his desk. "Do you know that if you choose to stay home, and later must be rescued, there will be emergency personnel who will risk their lives in order to save you?"

“I admit to not thinking of that, but I’m here because the children want to see you, and be assured that you still have a job.”

“In that case, tell them that I’m fine, and still working. No problem.”

Travis got to his feet, and now they were face-to-face, with only the desk between them.

“They insisted that you do the job. And it is your fault, for telling me in front of them that sad story about your sick father.”

For the first time, Mary spoke. “Why did you tell them about Dad, Joe?”

“It’s complicated,” Joe admitted, hoping she’d forget about the whole thing.

“No, it isn’t. You wanted me to feel pity for you,” Travis accused.

“No, I didn’t.” Joe denied it, but maybe there was something of that.

“Yes, you did, and you even lied. It’s obvious that you own this place, and can’t be fired.”

“I didn’t lie. I was simply trying to make you understand that you were being unfair with me.”

“Enough!” Mary shouted. And when they were silent, she added, almost in a whisper, “Sit down, both of you.”

They did, still looking at each other as if they were to jump at one another for a wrestling session.

Mary stared at Travis and said, “Mr. Anderson, I’m Joe’s sister, but I don’t play games like he does. This is an emergency—a life-and-death situation. The man who made the estimate discovered that your house is at risk of collapsing at any moment. Even without the storm.”

“At risk of collapsing?” Travis repeated as if he were in a trance.

Joe took over. “Yes. I don’t know how you managed to avoid inspections all these years, but before we can repair it, you will have to relocate to another place.”

Travis was still speechless.

Mary asked, “Mr. Anderson, do you have any relatives or friends on the mainland that you can stay with during the storm?”

“No, I don’t. I knew the house needed repairs, but I never expected this.” Travis looked at her. Joe sighed—the malice he perceived yesterday was gone;

now the man was pure angelic. And there was a vulnerability in him that provoked a desire to protect him.

Mary rose. "I'll be right back."

"Do you need to go now?" Joe asked, but he really wanted to say, *don't leave me alone with him.*

"Yes, I need to make a phone call. I trust you won't kill each other in the meantime." She faked a smile and glanced at both of them.

"No. Of course, not," Joe quickly said. She left, and Travis avoided Joe's gaze by looking at his own hands resting on his lap.

Joe resisted the temptation to ask something provocative. Taking a notepad, he started to make a list of all the things he had to do once he got home. Every so often, he peeked at Travis.

"Did you tell her?" Travis asked.

"Tell her what? How offensive you were yesterday?"

"No. What you think of me."

"Oh. Don't worry. I'm not going to tell everybody how much you need to get laid," Joe said with a smile that by now, he guessed, bothered Travis.

The man stood and walked to the door, just as Mary came back, and gestured for him to sit down again. Travis sat, still avoiding looking at Joe.

"Mr. Anderson, I was on the phone with my parents. We offer you and your family our home to stay in during the storm."

"What do you mean?" Travis gaped at Mary.

Joe was surprised too, but he let her explain.

"We live in Galloway. Our home used to be a farm, and it's big enough to accommodate a few families. You and your family are welcome to stay with us."

Being astonished by what she was offering, Joe asked, "Mary, did you tell Mom about his three children?"

"Sure. I told her that it was a family, who are customers of ours, but also friends. Because, we're friends too, right?" For some reason she was mad at him; Joe knew it. So, he sat back in his chair and left Travis and Mary to talk about the issue.

“It’s very generous of you, but I don’t know you. None of you,” Travis said.

Mary replied, “Good. We don’t know you either, but we’re willing to trust you. Right, Joe?”

“Yes, we are,” Joe muttered.

For the first time, Travis looked at him and seemed a little calmer. “Do you have a problem with that? I mean, with us staying with you?”

“Me? No, of course not. You are welcome to stay with us. Forget all the things we said to one another.”

“Joe has no say in this. Mr. Anderson,” Mary said. “My parents are the ones who decide, and they have extended an invitation to you.”

“Thanks. But I hadn’t accepted yet,” Travis told her, adding apologetically, “I need to think about it.”

Mary looked at Travis through narrowed eyes. Joe could tell that she was upset under all that niceness, which was confirmed when she said, “Well, you better hurry. That superstorm is heading this way, and in a few hours, the roads and bridges that connect the barrier islands with the mainland will be closed, and it will be too late for you to come to us.”

Travis looked at Joe again, as if he were expecting Joe to make the decision for him. It was so weird, but it was what Joe felt. He wrote their address on a piece of paper and handed it over to Travis. “This is where we live. Feel free to show up at any time, we will be expecting you.”

“Thanks, I truly appreciate this offer. I’m so surprised by your generosity that I don’t know what to do.”

“Do what is best for your children,” Mary said. “From Brigantine, regardless of how late it is in the evacuation, if you drive through the Atlantic City–Brigantine Connector, you can take Route 30, until you find Route 9, then make a right and take Route 9 until you see the firehouse, then you make a right, and in about two miles, there we are.”

Travis left, promising to consider the offer.

Joe sighed. “Thanks, sister. I appreciate your help so much.”

“I didn’t do it for you, or him. I did it for his family. They don’t deserve to be in danger because he is so stubborn.”

“I guess they’ll be staying in your house, right?”

“In my house? Well, it depends. Mom invited the Collins, and the Smiths to stay with us as well. And I invited Lucia and her kids—being my best friend, she is staying with me. There is a room left, but it’s too small for a whole family, so I convinced Mom to let Matt stay in there. Guess what? I’m spending the storm aftermath with your stupid ex.”

“Matt? Hasn’t he gone back to New York?”

“No. He’s at his new home, but he doesn’t have any emergency power. So Mom invited him to stay at your house, since you guys were roommates before.”

“No. Mom can’t do this to me, Mary.”

“I saved you, big brother. Matt will stay with Lucia, the kids and me. I hope the kids drive him crazy enough to go back to his home.”

“Thanks. But what about Travis and his children?”

“You mean, Travis’s family? Well, I hope his wife will like your place, because they will be staying with you. Perfect, isn’t it?”

“Which wife?”

“Travis’s. You said he has a family, I suppose he has a wife too? Or is it a husband? Yeah, you said something about your gaydar picking up a signal.”

“Travis had a wife, but she died a couple of years ago.”

“Oh. Gosh. None of you said anything.” She opened her eyes wide and dropped onto the chair. “And I thought you were going after a married man.”

Now Joe understood why she was upset before. “Of course not. Even I have limits. I thought I told you about his wife’s death, but I guess I didn’t.”

“Well, you’re roomed with Travis and his kids, unless you’d prefer Matt. Take your pick.”

“No way. I’d rather take my chances with Travis and the kids. I’ll probably stay in the main living room anyway.”

“That will be a very busy place. Mom already started to put all the couches from the attics in there. We’ll be spending the storm all together, among the Collins, and the Smiths.”

Chapter 5

Standing on his front porch, Travis contemplated the waves for a few minutes. Nothing could take Joe out of his mind, or the sensation of those kisses from his mouth. He still didn't know what to do. He knew that he had to do the best for his children, but spending the storm together with Joe's family was going to be disturbing. He had no doubt of that.

Nadine stood by his side. "My mom said that if you want we can take the kids with us to her cousin's house in Vineland."

He heard her, and turned around. "Thanks, Nadine. Please tell your mother that I appreciate her thinking of us."

"But you can't stay here. Look at that ocean, and the storm is still hundreds of miles away." She sounded really concerned. Travis looked at his kids, who were running around as if nothing was coming, and made up his mind.

"I won't stay here. I will be spending the storm in Galloway."

"Galloway? Who do you know over there?"

He knew that sooner or later he would have to tell her; he picked later. "I have some new friends—business associates, really, who own a farm and have plenty of space for us to stay. Come on, help me pack."

She followed him inside. "I've never been to Galloway, but I've heard it's like living in the woods."

"Well, the shore isn't safe right now, is it?"

"No, I guess the woods will do."

A couple of hours later, she stood by him, observing the many suitcases they had packed. "It looks more like moving home than a simple evacuation, Travis."

"Most of this will stay in my car, because there's a chance we'll have to find a place to stay while the house gets fixed."

"Really? Well, keep in touch, won't you?"

"Sure, I will. If I forget I'm sure you won't."

She hugged the kids. "Yep. Well, if we're done, I'm calling Mom to pick me up."

Travis nodded. “Nadine, when Ella starts school, would you like to work at the bank with me?”

“Sure. It would be great. But I don’t know anything about banks.”

“We’ll train you—clerical work is not that hard. What’s hard is to find a loyal employee like you.”

She left almost crying, and Travis wondered why. He hoped she wasn’t falling in love with him, as he’d suspected in the past, because after the kisses he’d endured the day before, he knew he might not date a man, but he was sure that he would never marry another woman.

It had been one of the busiest days Joe remembered in his whole life, and he was grateful for it. Otherwise, the times he’d peeked at the road hoping to see Travis would have increased tenfold. He tested that all the batteries were topped, before he took down the solar panels and boarded up the windows at the farm. He’d forgotten that the property had so many windows, and that it was so big. All the while, his mom gave orders left and right, like a sergeant, and his father gave counter-orders. In the end, he’d assumed the role of leader—a role he didn’t like, but nothing would get done otherwise.

All the guests had arrived already, except for Travis. And as the daylight ended, Joe feared the man wasn’t coming. His mom was waiting for everyone to arrive before she gave the little discourse she’d prepared about how things were going to be during and after the storm. That part Joe couldn’t take away, because she managed the kitchen.

It was a real relief when he saw Mary walking in with Travis and the kids by her side. Joe went to greet them, but Mary reached their parents first and made the introductions. Apparently, she had told them about Travis’s dead wife earlier, so they wouldn’t ask about it.

Times like that, Joe felt very proud of his little sister.

“It’s Joe, Daddy.” One of the kids saw him walking toward them—Joe wasn’t sure if it was Richard or Edward, but he felt glad they were happy to see him.

“Hey. Welcome aboard.” He truly didn’t know what to say, but he found himself between the children, answering questions about the farm. No, there were no horses or any other animals, only some chickens; within seconds, he

needed Mary's rescuing. His mom was also greeting the kids, and after a few minutes, she ordered everybody to sit down, and gave her little welcome speech.

Basically, during the storm, which was due to hit in five hours, everybody would stay in the main house, because it was the safest place. The center room where they were, which was a huge living room, didn't have any windows and it was closer to the kitchen, and there were a couple of bathrooms.

She even assigned bathrooms for ladies and gentlemen. No doubt, she was having fun.

One of Lucia's kids asked where children were supposed to go, and everybody laughed. Joe found himself staring at Travis, fascinated by how the man's face lit up when he laughed. He should do it more often. Joe walked over to him. "Come on, let me show you where you will be staying after the storm."

Travis was holding Ella, who had been struggling to get down, and Mary offered. "Let her down. I'll keep an eye on her and the boys."

Joe noticed how Travis observed the whole room before putting the girl on the floor. There were four more children of different ages running around too. Ella joined them. There was a part of the main room that had been designated for the children, but at the present time, they were all over.

Chapter 6

Travis followed Joe out of the main house, along a pathway leading to one of the smaller houses. The place was bigger than he expected, and it was really nice; not a farm in the woods, but a modern set of housing units. Travis had picked up only what they would need for a couple of days, leaving the rest of their stuff in his car, which was parked in a garage that could accommodate eight vehicles.

“Who lives here? I mean, are these guest houses, or does anybody live in them?” He asked only for small talk; he felt awkward after the way he’d acted during their first encounter, and he’d been playing with the idea of offering Joe an honest apology.

After a brief hesitation, Joe answered his question. “My parents live in the main house, Mary lives in the other small house, and I live in this one.”

It took Travis a few seconds to process his words. “What? Are you telling me that we will be staying with you?”

“No. I mean, yes. I only use the room upstairs. The rest of the house will be for you and the children.”

All the thoughts of apologies were gone. Indeed, by the time Travis finished with him, there would be more offenses to count.

“You bastard. You planned everything, didn’t you?” Travis couldn’t believe it; but it was in front of his eyes. Joe had set him up.

“Lower your voice, please... I don’t know what you’re talking about. Come on, get in.”

Before he could react, Joe pushed him into his house and closed the door. Travis breathed and controlled the rage he felt as he observed Joe pacing around the living room, before he finally looked across at him.

“I didn’t plan anything. Mary assumed your wife was still alive when she invited you to stay with us.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I knew, because Nadine told me, but I forgot to tell Mary, so she thought your family included your wife when she planned this whole accommodation distribution.”

“Set up, I’d call it,” Travis accused him, even if he did find it hard to believe that someone like Mary would have colluded with her brother.

“Please keep my family out of it. They are simply offering a shelter for you and your family, like they’ve done with our friends.”

“And you?”

“Me?”

“Isn’t this too convenient for you?”

“Travis—or should I keep calling you Mr. Anderson?”

He ignored the question and snapped at him, “You planned this from the beginning. What’s next? Are you going to rape me, or do you think I will be grateful enough to give myself to you?”

Joe stilled, his dark eyes wide open in shock; for a few seconds he only stared at Travis. When Joe finally spoke he sounded deeply offended. “Listen, Travis, and listen very well. I don’t have any intention of taking advantage of you. I will never do anything to you, unless you ask me first. Indeed, at this point, you would have to beg me.”

Travis perceived the disappointment in Joe’s expression, but ignored it. “Beg? Who, me? Well, if that’s the case, I’m safe. Nothing will ever happen between us. I’m totally immune to your charm.”

“Poor me, my ego just died. Travis finds me sexless.”

It upset Travis to hear Joe making fun of him. “You’re such a liar.”

“Stop it, Travis. Don’t begin again. I promised myself I would leave you alone.”

“Do whatever you want. There’s no point, Joe. I don’t like men.” *Who was being the liar?* Travis thought, dismayed.

Joe scowled at him. “Yes, I know. You feel nothing for me, nothing at all.” He stared suspiciously. “When I kissed you yesterday... what did you feel?”

Travis sighed and avoided Joe’s eyes. “A little embarrassment. Nothing more. If you stop insinuating there could be something between us, maybe we can be friends.”

“So nothing at all?” Joe repeated studying Travis’s face.

“Nothing. Listen, Joe, we can sleep together, I mean, we can share the same bed, and nothing will ever happen, unless you forced yourself on me.” Travis

stepped closer, but stopped at a safe distance. "And if you do so, I will defend myself. You've been warned."

Joe closed the gap between them. "So let's share the bed. It's a challenge."

"Never. It was just a way of making my point clear." Travis resisted the impulse to step back as much as he could. But Joe's muscular body pressed to his was more than Travis could handle, and after a few seconds, he started to walk backward.

Joe asked devilishly, "If you feel nothing, why do you run when I get close to you?"

Travis stepped back again, but this time he had nowhere to go. He could feel the couch behind his calves. Joe raised a hand and chuckled while the tip of his index finger wandered up and down Travis's face.

"What do you think I'll do to you?" Joe whispered, while the finger traced the contour of Travis's mouth. For a second, Travis was lost in the simple caress and the raw desire in Joe's eyes. *Will he kiss me again?* He glared at Joe's full lips, only the disturbing finger on his own preventing him from being the one to steal a kiss. He had gone mad for sure, because he also felt the unexpected impulse to dart out his tongue and lick that finger. Instead, he moved his face to the side and dropped his gaze.

"Joe, I must admit. I'm scared of you."

"Why? I already told you that I would never do anything against your will." Joe moved one step away.

"I'm not sure," Travis answered honestly. He was confused and more scared of his own reactions to Joe, than of the man himself.

Joe sighed and said, "I'm making a supreme effort trying to understand you. Let's go. We need to settle down in the main room before the storm hits."

Travis rushed to the door and opened it, and Joe started to follow him, saying, "Listen, Travis, I still would like us to take the challenge."

"So, this is Travis." Matt stood by the door and blocking Travis's exit, after giving him the once-over.

"What are you doing here, Matt?" Joe asked his former lover, outraged.

Standing between both men, Travis inquired, "How do you know my name? Who are you?"

Matt examined Travis from head to toe. Ignoring his question and addressing Joe, Matt said, "I was looking for you. Your sister said that you were showing the place to a guest. And I remembered a tour you gave me once of this building. So many memories, huh?"

Joe could've died right there. Travis turned around and looked at him with a silent accusation in his eyes. When Joe didn't say anything, Travis confronted Matt again and repeated the question. "Who are you, and how do you know my name?"

"Joe told me all about you." Joe hastened to them when he heard the lie; knowing Matt, this was going to be ugly. But Travis was already facing Matt.

"What did he tell you about me?"

"Enough to know you are a cheap substitute for me," Matt sneered.

"And what are you exactly to Joe?" Travis asked, looking Matt up and down.

"We've been lovers for many years," Matt seemed pleased to inform.

"Enough, Matt," Joe interrupted. "We broke up ten months ago. Don't listen to him, Travis, and just go, please."

Travis nodded at him and went for the door, but Matt intercepted him.

"Before you go, there is one thing you must know. Joe belongs to me. I was the one who taught him everything he knows—about sex, at least. If he is good in bed, it is because of me. When we met, poor Joe didn't even know how to kiss. I tutored him. So, let's make this very clear. Every time he does anything to you—every kiss, every caress—he will be using a skill he learned from me." He paused, apparently delighted by the effect of his words on Travis's face, before adding, "I was his first lover, the one he will never forget."

Travis couldn't speak; he opened his mouth, and nothing came out.

"Travis, are you okay?" Joe ventured to ask.

Travis jumped backward. "Don't touch me. Don't come anywhere near me."

Matt laughed. "You Jersey guys are so hypocritical."

Joe gave him a killer glare. “Look who’s talking.”

“So you were the one who corrupted him,” Travis accused Matt. “How could you dare to brag about it? You should be deeply ashamed of yourself.”

This time, the one without voice was Matt. He quickly changed his sights from Joe to Travis, and back to Joe.

“What is this, Joe? Where did you find this creature?”

“He is not what you think.”

“Then why did you last night—”

“Please, Matt, stop.” The expression in Joe eyes was imploring.

“Fine, but it will cost you,” Matt agreed.

“I’m out of here.” Travis headed for the door once more, but Matt stood in front of him again.

“No so fast. I’m not done with you yet!”

“Let him go, Matt. I told you, Travis is not what you think. He isn’t gay.” Joe could think whatever he wanted, but if Travis didn’t feel gay, well, he wasn’t. He was willing to respect that.

Matt strongly disagreed. “No? You lost your senses in these months away from me? He thinks he can steal you. Well, I have news for you, pretty boy. Joe is mine. If you’re craving a man, go and get one for yourself...”

“You don’t know what a man is,” Travis snarled. “But I’ll gladly show you!”

Everything happened so fast Joe couldn’t do anything. Travis punched Matt in the mouth, and with such force he sent him to the floor. Joe grabbed Travis barely in time to stop him from jumping on Matt and continuing the beating.

Still on the floor, Matt pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, to clean the blood from his nose and mouth, and said with rage, “You broke my nose! Okay, you can kill me if you wish, but the truth is, if Joe feels attracted to you, it’s because you have a little resemblance to me. Yes, you look like a counterfeit copy of me. But like the fake you are, you’ll never be for him what I am.”

Travis was so upset, he ignored that Joe was holding him, and shouted, “You know what? I don’t like men, but if I ever sleep with Joe, you will become only a sad memory.”

Joe was amazed by what he heard. But knowing Matt, he'd better finish this fast.

"Matt, be mature please. Stop this nonsense." He let Travis free, but stayed alert in case of another attack. "I'm sorry, Travis, you can go now."

For a moment, he thought Travis was going to spit in his face or something. Their eyes met and Joe was shocked by what he saw. Travis felt pity for him.

"Joe, I'm sorry if I judged you wrongly. You've been a victim of this depraved person. It is so sad how you were corrupted at such a young age. But there is hope, if you want to change your ways, that is."

Matt's laugh resonated around the room, which was very unusual for him. "Wow! Joe, this is more than I can take. He really is something amazing. Pretty boy, be careful with our dear Joe. He might surprise you."

"I'm not talking to you," Travis said, and turned back to Joe. "We'll talk another day, when this person isn't around."

"Then you will never talk," Matt retorted. "I've no intention of leaving him alone with you ever."

Joe watched as Travis left. "That was so cruel of you, Matt. Who knows what he is thinking about us."

Matt accepted the help Joe provided to stand up and replied, "He's thinking what he should think. You are mine. Ouch! That monster broke my nose."

Joe checked his injury. "No, Matt, your precious nose is fine. I can't believe that just happened."

"You love him, don't you?"

The question took Joe by surprise. It was too soon to speak of love, and it wasn't Matt's business.

"What are you doing here, Matt? I thought we agreed to never see each other again."

"Your mother invited me to spend the storm here."

"In that case, you must join everybody else in the main room. Let's go."

When they arrived at the main house, Joe searched the room and found Travis holding Ella while speaking with Lucia.

Mary was astonished by Matt's bruise, and looked at Joe in silent inquiry. He raised his hands in the air. "I've nothing to do with it."

"No, he didn't," Matt confirmed. "It was that monster, so primitive... Travis."

"You provoked him first. Mary, can you please get some ice for him?"

The three of them moved to the kitchen area.

Mary gave Matt some ice. "Here. Take these pills too."

"Thanks."

While Matt was busy trying to apply the ice, Mary got next to Joe and whispered, "Travis is my hero!"

Joe snickered.

Travis got to where the others were, and busied himself finding a place to sit with his kids and wait out the storm—on the outside, because the one inside him? That one might be endless.

So what if Joe had a lover? Who cares? It wasn't his problem. But it was getting harder and harder to stop thinking about Joe. He had lost his temper again, and that worried him. But the idea of that man touching Joe in the intimate ways Matt implied made Travis's blood boil. He looked across the room and saw the culprit talking with Joe and Mary, and the rage burned inside him again.

Travis breathed deeply and leaned back on the couch, where he sat next to his children. Ella had fallen asleep, but Richard and Edward were playing games on their tablets. He checked that Ella was comfortable, and closed his eyes, but the memory of Joe's finger touching his lips kept him awake.

One hour before the storm made land, the electric power was gone. According to some of the guests, it had been shut down by the electric company as a precaution. The darkness lasted only a few seconds: Joe had harvested solar energy in a battery bank and they were using that to power the lights, the TV and a charging station for all the electronic devices the guests had brought with them.

Travis could hear an electric generator too. He asked Mary about it the next time she walked by him. "Oh, that's Dad's generator. He's using it for the

freezers and the refrigerator—he doesn't want to take a chance with the food, because this is the first time we'll be relying on Joe's solar power setup."

In the next hours, Travis saw very little of Joe. He was busy making sure the electricity was stable, and helping the other guests with different things. Seeing him like that, Travis had to admit, he was not a bum. Not at all.

When Joe finally sat down he almost fell asleep, in spite of the violent winds of the storm raging outside. He found a quiet corner next to the unlit fireplace, and lay there on his old camping gear. When Matt sat next to him, he couldn't find a polite way to reject him in front of everyone. At least there would be no touching. But Matt was upset.

"I can't believe I'm to share Mary's place with all those kids."

"Everybody is sharing with kids."

"You could let me share your room, you know."

"Forget it, Matt. I'm not sharing a room with you ever again." Joe turned around and noticed that Travis, who was on one of the couches with Ella, was watching them. Just what he needed; he could imagine what the man must be thinking.

The best option was to close his eyes, and amazingly as the storm increased, the conversation diminished around him. It was as if everybody was worried the house would not hold on.

Joe knew it would, but at one point they heard a big bang, and he also knew one of the centennial trees had succumbed to the winds, probably taking part of the roof with it on the other side of the main house. He looked to his father, who was silent, like everyone else. His old man simply shook his head, worried.

Joe made a mental note to tell him that he had been right about removing the solar panels during the storm. The cable TV service went out too, as well as all the cellular and Internet signals.

His mother's old AM radio was the only way to know what was going on. And only one radio station was transmitting. Hard to believe they were in the modern era.

Chapter 7

The next morning the daylight showed all the damage the storm had caused. A couple of old trees had fallen and there was debris all over the property. But they fared well enough, because according to the news—which they were listening to on the radio, since the cable TV was still out—the shore and other communities had a truly bad experience.

The governor had forbidden the return to the South Jersey barrier islands until the authorities checked everything. Some of the guests were upset by this; they wanted to go and check on their properties.

A mobile cellular tower had also fallen down, which explained why the smartphones didn't have a signal. Once again, Joe's father was right—the phone landline he insisted on keeping still worked, and it didn't need any electricity. The problem was, very few people had landline phones at home. Most of his employees, including Daniel, relied on cell phones.

Joe had another long day ahead of him. He felt grateful and surprised when Travis offered his help with anything he needed. Joe could use another pair of hands; while he stood on the top of a ladder, having someone handing him tools, it was helpful and saved time. Amazingly, during those times, they worked in silence; no arguing, or anything.

He felt very pleased with himself when Travis showed interest in the solar power and how it worked, and Joe explained it to him while he started to set up the panels over the roof again. Travis was full of questions, and fascinated about the process of converting solar energy into DC power and later into AC power. Like many people, Travis didn't know that the panels themselves didn't store any energy—that what the panels captured from the sun had to be stored in batteries.

All of a sudden, Travis said, "I'm sorry, Joe."

They were taking a break for lunch, seated on the fallen trees, and Joe had no idea why Travis was apologizing.

"A few weeks ago, one of the branches of the bank I work for was robbed. It was a bad experience, but nobody was hurt and the robbers were caught."

For a moment, Joe thought maybe Nadine was right. Travis was going insane—*what does all that have to do with me?* But then something in Travis's

eyes allowed him to figure it out. “Let me guess—the bank robbers had tattoos and drove a dirty van?”

Travis nodded. “I shouldn’t have judged you simply by the way you look.”

Joe smiled. “In that case, I should also apologize for kissing you without permission.” His smile banished and he leaned over to whisper, “Your mouth is hard to resist.” When he noticed that Travis seemed frozen, Joe quickly asked, “And how did the robbery end?”

Travis wasn’t frozen anymore, but by his troubled expression, Joe kind of knew the ending. “No! You didn’t!”

“I’m not proud of my temper. You know I lose it easily, but that was one of those times it wasn’t such a bad thing.”

“You could have been killed, and for what? For other people’s money?”

“It wasn’t the money I was concerned about. It was the people in the bank at the time. Besides, when I took the initiative, two of the customers, who are veterans, helped. By the time the police arrived, everything was under control.”

“Oh, God. Listen, I barely know you, but regardless of our bad start, I think we could be—that there is a future for us.” Suddenly, Joe realized that pure friendship would never be in that future; he wanted much more. Travis was staring back at him, as if he’d grown a new head, so Joe just added, “Please, don’t you ever risk your life in that way again. You must think of your children.”

“I know. I’ll never do such a thing again. I’m still affected by it.”

Joe had the feeling that it was the first time Travis had admitted that, and somehow he felt honored. And deeply concerned too. He was falling in love with this man, and there was nothing stopping it. Even if he chose to walk away from him and never see him again, it was already too late.

Right then, he wanted to embrace Travis and comfort him, but he couldn’t. Too many eyes were on them, and Travis might not even welcome the support. Joe looked at the blue sky above them and the beauty of the day. It was hard to believe that a storm had simply passed through, yet it had caused so much damage.

“We better check the battery bank again. Come on.”

He knew that soon it was going to be all the power at their fingertips—a theory that would be tested over the next week. In the aftermath of the storm,

many gas stations were closed and people lined up for hours to get gasoline. The combustible fuel started to be rationed out, and their neighbors that depended on electric generators powered by gasoline were growing anxious about being without a power source.

The only thing Joe could do for them was to set up a charging station in front of the farm—at least they could charge gadgets that had rechargeable batteries—while in the farm the electric generator could barely keep the main refrigerator running as it was.

It took more than a week for anyone to be allowed on to the South Jersey barrier islands again, of which Brigantine was one, and Joe had gone with Travis when he went to see the state of his house.

Even Joe was stunned by how destroyed the house was; it wasn't even fixable, as it had collapsed among the battered boats and scattered debris.

Travis observed the destruction in deep silence and didn't move for a few minutes. Joe stood next to him and, not knowing what else to say, he asked, "Do you have insurance?" Travis nodded but didn't speak.

Joe followed an impulse and held Travis's hand between his. At first, Joe feared he would be rejected, but Travis grabbed his hand and they stayed like that for a few minutes, side by side observing the devastation. Joe didn't want to name the moment, because it simply felt right.

Eventually Travis cleared his throat and breathed. "Thanks for taking us in during the storm, Joe."

"The credit goes to Mary. It was her idea. And of course, Mom and Dad who agreed with her," Joe replied.

Slowly, Travis released his hand and paced in front of what had been his driveway. "I don't want to imagine what could have happened to us, if we'd stayed here."

Joe shrugged. "Then don't. Listen, you and the kids are okay." Joe indicated with his hand at the house's ruins. "All of this can be rebuilt."

"Yes. But at this point, it would be a question of rebuilding or not. I heard on the radio that there would be a new law making it mandatory that houses are raised five feet up on pilings."

“I heard that too, but you know how things are around here. It will take months before anything is settled. Anyway, after you get reimbursed by the insurance, I suggest you meet with Daniel and Mary to discuss the best rebuild possibilities.”

“What about you?”

“I’m currently doing construction, because we are extra busy with work due to the storm. But also, due to the storm, my alternative energy company has customers even before I’ve started it. Isn’t that great?”

Joe almost regretted his comment, when he saw Travis’s expression. So he quickly added, “You and the kids are welcome to stay with me as long as you like.”

“Are you sure?” Travis sounded surprised.

The distress in the blue eyes touched Joe deeply, and he resisted the impulse to tell him that he was more than sure. He truly wanted to get to know him better, because in the almost two weeks they were sort of living together, it had been a crowded house, but finally, all the other guests were returning to their homes, which had been less damaged than Travis’s.

“In that case, you’d have to charge me some rent.”

That was the banker talking, Joe thought, but if that is what it takes for him to stay with me, so be it.

“Sure, you’d need to talk that through with Mom.” Joe wasn’t sure that she would charge Travis anything; she seemed very happy to have the children around, and his father spent hours telling Edward and Richard all those stories Joe never had the patience to hear. The kids seemed genuinely interested in what the old man had to say. The children’s presence had become therapeutic.

Chapter 8

Having the support of the family had been more valuable than Travis ever imagined. After the storm, he had to spend far too many hours at the different branches of the bank, making sure everything was getting back to normal. The process seemed never-ending at times. He would get Nadine in the mornings and bring her to the farm, but sometimes she had to leave and he would still be busy. So, having Christine and Mary—Joe's mom and sister—to look after the kids for a couple of hours was priceless.

Nadine had been surprised to find Travis living with Joe's family, but after a brief recounting of the facts, she didn't ask anything else, though she did tell Travis she thought having a family again was great for his mental health. The girl apparently didn't get the part about the arrangement being temporary.

And just like that, a whole month went by, and Travis was wondering if he should continue sharing the house with Joe, or accept Mary's offer to move in with her. He almost accepted her offer, because she had looked at him with a suspicious expression when she made it, but he was already settled in Joe's house; even if the kids spent more time at the main house, at night they slept in the small house.

Joe only came there to sleep too, because after the storm they had so much work, his days were longer than Travis's.

One of the rare days Joe came home early, Travis followed him to his room. He had never been in there before, and he was curious. The room took the whole second floor of the house, and included a bathroom and a small office.

"Welcome to my sanctuary." Joe moved an arm in a circular manner so Travis could see the room. It was amazing. The whole house was beautiful, but this room was awesome. Travis walked across to look out of the panoramic windows; they were half of the whole place, and the view was astonishing. Now he understood why New Jersey was called the Garden State.

The storm had knocked down many trees, but the majority still stood proud. Being at the end of fall, the trees were dressed in multicolored leaves, and from there he could see an ocean of trees, and blue sky. The side of the room where the windows were located was circular; on the opposite side was an unlit fireplace, where Joe stood, realigning figures over the mantelpiece.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“It’s really nice.”

“Do you want to share it with me?”

Travis didn’t look at him, but he knew Joe was making him a serious offer.

“Mary offered first,” Travis said, turning around.

“Anything Mary offers you is provisional. She’s getting married in a few months, remember?”

“I know, and I don’t think we will have a place of our own before her wedding.”

“So?” Joe took a step toward him.

It had been weeks since he’d looked at him that way. Travis confessed to himself that he’d missed that naughty spark in Joe’s dark eyes. “If we stay with you, I’ll continue to use the same room I’m using now.”

“I’m hungry,” Joe said, looking him up and down. “Unless you can offer me something better than food, I’m out of here.”

“You see? You are doing it again. You just ruined it. I was trying to be your friend, Joe.”

“Travis.” Joe stared at him. “I’m glad you’re here with your kids, and that my family likes you so much. I will do anything to help you in anyway. But I will never be your friend.”

“Why not? This is ridiculous, we should be friends, we can share our families.”

“No.”

“Yes, we can.”

“I said no. I hate being your friend.”

“Why?”

“Damn it, because of this.”

Joe pushed him and Travis fell back onto the bed. In one swift move, Joe was on top of him, one leg over Travis’s legs, and one hand holding his chin so he had to face him.

“Because this is the way I want you... aren’t you afraid?”

Travis shook his head and thought to himself, *how can I tell you that the one I'm scared of the most, is myself?*

He was doing his best to ignore the heat that Joe's body lit in his own. "No, I'm not afraid of you anymore, Joe," he said.

Joe let himself fall onto the big comfy bed next to Travis and changed the subject. "See? It is big enough. We can sleep together. I challenge you to sleep with me for a whole month, if you dare."

"There is no use, I told you. I won't change my feelings for you, even if we... share this bed."

"Then it's a deal. All you have to do is come here after everybody else is sleeping."

"Sounds like I will be sneaking in." Travis lay on his side, his head propped on one hand.

"Are you taking the challenge?"

"First, tell me the rules."

"Which rules?"

"This challenge is like a game, isn't it? Every game has rules."

Joe thought for a second. "Okay, we can't touch each other."

"Each other? You can't touch me. I have no interest in touching you."

Joe turned on his side, so he could look Travis in the eyes. "Travis, please be honest with me?"

"About what?"

"Are you sexually attracted to men?"

Travis moved his eyes from one side to the other, as if refusing to meet Joe's. After a few seconds, he asked, "And you—what about your relationship with Matt?"

"I asked you first, Travis."

"If you answer my question honestly, I might answer yours."

"Okay. Matt and I met at college, lived together for six years and broke up ten months ago. His fault, he was unfaithful to me more than once. I can't forget or forgive that. Your turn."

“That’s it? No more details?”

“There is nothing else worth telling.” Joe leaned closer. “Travis,” he prompted, “do you like men?”

After deeply sighing, Travis said, “Yes. I feel attracted to men, but control it, because it’s wrong.”

Regardless of what he had thought when he first met him, that answer surprised Joe. “It’s worse to repress your desire and out it as rage against the world. Think about it—people concluding you’re nuts, when you’re really in need of some sexual release of the right kind.” He paused before asking, “When was the last time you had sex?”

“Come on, Dr. Freud, are you serious?” Travis was playing cool, but his voice gave away his nerves.

“Travis, answer the question, please.”

“Before Sophia got sick,” he muttered.

The honesty he was getting from Travis was great, but Joe didn’t want to dwell on anything for too long, afraid Travis would leave the room before they got a deal. “There is no reason to be ashamed of that. I’ve been kind of celibate for many months, because the idea of intimacy brought memories of Matt and his infidelity. It was as if he had killed the pleasure of the act for me.” Joe silently added, *Until I met you, and then, it was madness. For having you, no matter what.*

“Have you been with anybody else besides Matt?”

“Yes.”

Travis sat on his ankles with an indignant expression. “Were you unfaithful to him too?”

“No. I spent months without sex after Matt and I were done.”

“And?”

“Aren’t you being too nosy?”

Travis laughed. “Ah! You don’t like your own medicine, Dr. Freud.”

Joe briefly laughed too, and with a serious expression said, “The sexual dynamic between men is different.”

“Different? How?”

“There is no dating the usual way, one takes what’s offered. The romance might come later or never come.”

“Hold it right there. So you got the chance of having sex with some random guy and took it?”

“Didn’t you ever hear of a one night stand?”

“Yep.”

“There wasn’t any need to spend any more time with another man than necessary for a mutual safe and quick release.”

“Mutual safe and quick release,” Travis repeated thoughtfully. “It sounds very therapeutic.”

“Trust me, it is.” Joe’s grin turned wicked. “Would you like to give it a try?”

“No, thanks.”

“But we’re doing the challenge at least.”

“Wait a second. What about my children? I don’t want to imagine them finding us sleeping together.”

Joe sat up and buried his face into his hands. “Yeah, that would be terrible. Not to mention Mom, or Mary.”

“Well, it was an interesting project while it lasted.” Travis’s relief was obvious.

Then Joe remembered something. Rising to his feet he opened a closet and found a gadget that he dropped on the bed saying, “It’s solved. I’ll tell my family that you’re going to use my office to do the work you bring home, and this monitor will let us know if any of the children wake up in the middle of the night.”

Travis looked at what Joe showed him. It was a surveillance set of some kind. It included a camera, with a small monitor screen, similar to a baby monitor. “Are you sure? I mean, will this detect noise too?”

“Yes. It’s noise activated, it will turn on if anybody passes by it. We can set it at the bottom of the stairs.”

“Why do you have this?”

Joe wasn't ready to share with Travis the real motivation for his interest in surveillance systems, so he told him the other true reason. "We were being robbed at The Handyman, and I got a few of these to catch the thieves, and we did. I brought this one home for Mom to use with Dad when she was in a different room. He refused to be monitored like a baby."

"Only you could suggest such a thing to your father."

Joe shrugged. "You haven't seen how it is when he's not feeling well. We can use it, and if any of the children come looking for you, you will have enough time to get into the office, or go downstairs, before they get here."

Travis looked from the gadget to Joe and back again. "Okay, let's give it a try," he said and quickly added, "And you, Joe—what is your part of the deal? If you can't touch me, how are you going to change my mind?"

"I don't know yet. Even if I knew, I wouldn't say. It would be like showing my cards, don't you think?"

"Agreed, but I don't get what's in it for you yet?"

Joe couldn't tell him that just seeing him made him happy. And the idea of sharing his bed with him was very exciting. He ignored Travis's question and instead said, "The challenge is that we will share the bed for a whole month, beginning tonight, and I can't touch you. If I touch you in an intimate manner, I lose. And if at the end of that month, nothing has happened between us, I must accept defeat, and become your friend with no teasing ever again." He pointed at him. "Your rule is that you have to be honest. If you ever feel anything, you can't hide it. You must act on it, Travis. And that's my gain, if you will."

"What exactly do you mean?"

"If you ever feel like touching me or kissing me, since I can't do it, you are the one who must take the lead."

"And if I do—emphasis on *if*—what would you do?"

Joe raised his eyebrows in a speculative manner and grinned before he lay on the bed again. "If you take the initiative, it means I've won." He eased Travis down onto the bed and positioned himself so that each had a thigh pressed against the other's genitals. At first Travis remained serene, as if it took him a few seconds to realize what the new position would do to his cock, then he gasped but said nothing.

"Don't worry," Joe murmured against his mouth, "I'm not doing anything now, simply answering your question."

They stared at each other for a few seconds Joe steadied himself on his elbows and made a couple of brief movements; enough to send the right message. He leaned forward and whispered in Travis's ear, "If you ever kiss me, or touch me in an intimate way, I wouldn't stop until I heard you yelling— *Ahh, Joe, that's it, Oh! Joe, Ahh!*" He basically finished the comment by faking an orgasm, tremors and all.

"You pervert. The deal is off." Travis pushed him off him and, standing, fixed his still impeccable clothes.

"What? Don't tell me you haven't yelled like that making love? Come on. Maybe in not the same way, but... You haven't. How did you conceive the kids then?"

"If you don't want to talk about your relationship with Matt, I don't want to talk about my marriage either. But one thing I can assure you, my marriage was consummated."

"Yeah. I believe you." Joe raised his hand and started counting with his fingers until he reached three.

"I'm a man, Joe." Travis didn't get the joke, he seemed offended.

"I'm a man too, Travis. Let's make this very clear. I'm a man who prefers to have sexual relations with another man. I like men. However, I don't want to become a woman. I'm happy to be a man. Clear enough?"

"Yes."

"Travis... I'll be waiting for you tonight. The door will be unlocked. And if I'm not home, like those times when I travel, or stay late at the office, please feel free to come and sleep in our bed."

"I'm not sure, Joe."

"About what? Are you still afraid of me?"

"No. I just showed you I trust you."

"So forget your doubts. We have a deal." Joe extended his hand, but pulled it back. "Sorry, I forgot I can't touch you."

"You can't touch me in bed. A handshake is fine."

They shook hands, and then Joe said, "Let's go raid the kitchen, I'm starving."

“You’re always hungry.”

Joe displayed his wicked grin. “You have no idea how much or how often.”

Travis didn’t wait for him and headed for the main house. Joe’s laughter followed him.

Chapter 9

One night, Joe came home very late, and found Mary waiting for him in the kitchen. She was working on her wedding invitations at the kitchen table. Joe finished eating, surprised that she didn't speak at all. Someone had snatched his little sister, or she was getting old. It was only when he said good night and was heading to his home that she stopped him.

"We need to talk."

Joe knew what was coming. "I'm tired, maybe another day..." When he saw her wary expression, he added, "Okay, tell me."

"Not in here. Let's go to my room."

Once there, she sat on the bed and he on a couch in front of her. She was really concerned about something.

"Changed hair color again? I prefer you blonde," he tried to joke.

"I feel like a redhead right now," she replied.

"You're a beauty anyway. Why are you so mad at me?"

"It was very smart of you, telling Mom that Travis was going to be using the computer inside your room. If she ever sees him going in or out of there, she will assume he's working, right?"

"Well, it's true he brings work home. And I'm not using my desk in that office anyway. Did you know that being a general manager means he supervises four managers at different branches of the bank?"

She did that thing with her nose to show she didn't believe him. "Have I lost your trust or something?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I know you and Travis are sleeping together. And you haven't said a word to me." She rose to her feet and pointed at him. "I told you when I started to sleep with Daniel. Not even Lucia knew before you."

Joe was going to reply, but she raised her hand stopping him.

"And the even more amazing thing is, Travis is acting like nothing is happening. Like you and he have been sleeping together all your lives.

He raised both arms. "May I say something?"

"Go ahead. I'm waiting."

"Mary, the day, I—well, I'm going to say it as politely as I can—the day I get to know Travis in the biblical sense, everybody will know. He probably won't be able to sit or walk normally for a week."

She climbed up on him and hit him with her little fists, and they continued to struggle until they started laughing like little kids. After a while, they sat together, very close, Joe holding her in his arms. He talked against her hair.

"I'm sorry. I was kidding. I should have listened to you. It is so hard to lie next to him every night, without being able to touch him."

"I still don't understand that part about sharing the bed."

"It's exactly how it sounds. My bed is big, so he has his side, and I have mine. I usually go to bed after him—most of the time he's already sleeping, or pretends to be. I wake up before him and that's it."

"Do you really expect me to believe that you haven't tried any tricks?"

"Well, I left a window open once, and when he felt the cold in the middle of the night, he sheltered in the heat of my body. That is the best experience so far. It was wonderful feeling him bound to me, and infuriating when I realized I could do nothing else. And my blissful moment was short-lived."

"Why? Did he know about the window?"

"No. His paternal instincts took over. He woke up and went to check to see if his kids were cold too. I stayed in bed, faking sleep and when he came back to bed, he had a sweater on. He even threw a blanket over me."

She giggled. "Travis is a great person, Joe. If you feel you can't control yourself, just stop this, eh?"

"Don't worry, I'm taking precautions. No, you won't be getting any details of my method."

"About the open window trick. Don't keep doing that. Soon, it will be winter and it's dangerous."

"Before winter gets here, our month of sharing the bed will be over..."

"And his house will be done. Joe, I can't make more excuses in order to give you time. I reassigned the crew twice, I ordered the wrong materials, and I'm simply running out of excuses. If Daniel finds out, I could lose him."

“I won’t ask any more from you.”

“So, what have you concluded? Is he really straight or not?”

“I’m not sure, Mary. He is an enigma. Sometimes, I catch him looking at me in a way I want to believe is something else, but then he acts like I’m just a friend. So far, the only fact clear to me is that Travis likes to share the bed with me.”

“Maybe it’s the bed,” she teased.

“If that’s so, he can have it. I’ll buy another.”

“I told you he’s straight. Listen, Joe, I will help you. But don’t come crying when he breaks your heart and your soul. Because this time, it will be worse than with Matt.”

“Thank you, you are the best, Mary. But why do you think it will be worse?”

“Because with Matt it was all about sex. With Travis, I can feel your heart and soul are deeply involved. You’ve stolen his kiss, but he took your heart.”

They shared the hug for a few seconds longer, and when they separated, Mary smiled and Joe smiled back, but once again, the smile didn’t reach his eyes. He returned to his room.

Travis was still awake, reading a book and sitting on the bed. Joe began to take off his shirt and noticed Travis observing his nipples. For a moment, Joe felt some hope. *He finally finds something interesting.*

“Do you like what you see?”

Travis raised his head with an expression like he finished inspecting a crack in the wall.

“You don’t have any holes.”

“Holes? What do you mean... Oh. No, I’m not into piercing.”

“The little holes in there...”

“Oh My God. Are you serious?”

Travis held his gaze. “Yes.”

“Travis, we are men. We don’t have holes in our nipples—not that you can see anyway. Well, maybe some might have, but I’ve never met anybody who does.”

“Oh. I never thought about it. I assumed all humans did.”

“How many men have you seen naked?”

“Forget it. I’m so dumb.” Travis put the book he was reading on the bedside table.

“I guess none besides yourself?” Joe said. “What about school? Didn’t you play sports and have showers afterward?”

“I avoided looking at anybody naked back then, but I’m looking at you right now.”

“And you—do you have any holes?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never checked. It’s a little hard to see for myself, besides...”

“Don’t say it, I know. It’s a sin.”

Joe studied his expression. Travis was really embarrassed, but he couldn’t let this opportunity go to waste.

“Can I see?” Joe asked. “Please open your shirt? Maybe you do have them.”

Travis opened his shirt like a child would, and Joe took a good look; although those pinkish nipples were begging for a lick, Joe controlled himself and only said, “No, you don’t have them either.”

“Well, we learn something new every day. My wife’s is the only chest I’ve seen before.”

“Travis.” When Joe felt he had his complete attention, he asked, “Please tell me a little bit about yourself.”

Travis thought for a few seconds, not sure where to start. Apparently, the beginning was the right place. “I’m adopted, but not in the sense of having loving parents cherishing me all my life. I was one of those babies that someone abandoned at the Atlantic City hospital, and I’d never known who were my parents. They could have been from anywhere. With so much traffic as AC got.”

“Did your adopted parents abuse you in any way?”

“No. They were good people, fostering children was part of their Christian ministry.” Travis smile was twisted in irony. “Their way to serve God, and gain access to Heaven.”

“Are you a religious person?”

“No, I was brought up that way, but I can think by myself. I don't believe everything I was ever told. But some of the things I heard about homosexuality while I was growing up, those things still call home in my brain.”

“You seem to have issues enjoying your sexuality. Why do you think that is?”

Again, Travis thought for a few seconds before answering. “I didn't grow up in Brigantine or Ocean City with the rich people I deal with now. I grew up in the worse part of AC, among whores, drug dealers and addicts.”

“Well, that's a surprise.”

“I grew up seeing people using sex to get what they wanted, and somehow, I rejected the physical aspect of it.”

“Wait a second, how were you exposed to that?”

“My adopted parents were Christians who managed a homeless shelter in AC, I grew up between those poor souls and the preaching of what sex and drugs do to people. We were living among those people until my adopted parents retired. That was when we moved to Brigantine.”

“Did you get your house from them?”

“Yes, I inherited it. I had no idea how bad its foundation really was.”

“It takes an expert eye, like Daniel's, to see certain things. What about your foster brothers and sisters? You don't keep in touch?”

“I did with some of them, but as they were growing up they moved to others states. In the end, I was the only one who stayed around here. The truth is we don't have much in common.” Breathing deeply, Travis muttered, “I know so little about life, that I have little in common with you.”

“Don't worry, I totally understand you. If you stay next to me long enough, you'll learn a few things.”

Travis froze. “Are you going to do the same things with me as Matt did with you?”

Joe's eyes got darker for a moment. Damn Matt and his poison, which continued to work long after the sting.

"No. I've other plans for us, Travis."

"What are you planning?"

"You will only know, if—emphasis on *if*—we ever make love."

"I understood what he said. And somehow he's right. The kisses, the caresses, will always be the same."

"Since when are you so interested in the subject? Besides, don't talk of what you don't know."

"It will be the same, right?"

"Damn it. No. I know how I will make it unique, at least for me."

"Tell me about it."

Joe's eyes widened, then reduced with suspicion. He had to be careful; Travis was playing one of his little innocent games. "Did I win the challenge?"

"No."

"Then what is this conversation about? Why do you want to know, if you are not going to do anything."

"I'm trying to understand how you think and feel. I'm very curious about it."

Joe studied his quiet, relaxed expression and sat on the most distant corner of the bed. He remembered the selling tips he learned in business school. Curiosity means interest. It was a point in his favor. "If we ever make love, I will do with you something I've never done with anyone, including Matt."

This time, Travis was the one who moved closer; either he was trying to listen better or to understand. "How will I know you really have done it only with me?" he asked.

Joe smiled and for a moment they shared a deep look into each other's eyes. Joe broke away before he lost control; it was so hard to resist kissing him right there.

"I can't give you any details without scaring the hell out of you, but believe me, you will know. There will be no doubts. Matt is wrong. Not everything I know I learned from him."

“So there have been others?”

Joe perceived a hint of jealousy in his tone. “I’m not discussing those details, Travis. All I’ll say to you is that I’ll volunteer to help you explore your body any time.”

“Were you with someone tonight?”

Joe was shocked by the question. *What was the name of the game now?* “Why do you ask?”

“You smell different. Since you got in the room I can smell a perfume. And your shirt is full of red hair.

“Listen, you first must give yourself to me, before the jealousy scene.”

“I’m not jealous. It’s just curiosity.”

“Curiosity killed the cat.” Joe picked at his shirt; apparently Mary had got a new perfume, along with the new hair color. It had a few of Mary’s hairs—Travis clearly had very good sight. Joe held one of the hairs up against the light.

“Yes, I was struggling with a redhead. Hottie girl.”

“Could be a guy. Some dudes grow hair as long as that.”

“Oh dear. And you are *not* jealous? If you were, I guess I would have to sleep on the couch.”

“If you don’t take a shower, you will. Only God knows what germs a person might carry.”

Joe took a deep breath and weighed his choices. If he got a hold of Travis in that moment, he probably would try to seduce him without thinking, so he chose to go into the shower saying, “Matt’s right. You have more in common with him than you want to admit.”

That would have to be enough retaliation. Travis turned over, turned off his lamp and went to sleep without another word. When Joe came out of the bathroom, he went to the next room, and somehow stacked himself on the small couch in the home office, only to be awakened by Travis a few minutes later.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. Please come back to the bed.”

“I’m okay here.”

Joe turned away. He was really upset. He might have somehow fallen in love with him, but Travis was getting on his nerves.

“Joe, in four more nights, the bet will be over. We won’t be sharing the bed anymore.”

“So what? Four nights or days, who cares? It will be the same, because apparently you’ve won. As a bonus you can take the bed with you. I’m getting a new one.”

“Thanks, but I’d rather not. Please let’s go to bed. If you sleep on this couch, everything will ache in the morning. Besides, we will be wasting one of the four remaining nights.”

Joe didn’t say anything, but he got up and climbed in on his side of the bed. *Waste... what the hell is Travis talking about?*

With that thought he fell asleep.

Chapter 10

The next night, Travis was on the computer finishing some work, still feeling embarrassed by having discovered that morning Mary's new hair color and perfume. She was probably the redhead Joe had struggled with the night before. He had witnessed how the siblings played like children a couple of times, something he found funny, but didn't understand because he didn't have brothers or sisters himself.

There was so much he didn't understand about Joe yet. The only thing he knew for sure was that he liked to be next to Joe, and he missed him when they were apart, even for a few hours.

Then he saw Joe came home with some bags.

"Howdy." The naughty way Joe smiled told him that he was up to something. But what?

"Hi." Travis looked at him. "What's all that?" He followed Joe into the bedroom.

"I went shopping. I needed a couple of things." Joe put the big bags with clothes over the dresser, took another small plastic bag, and put it inside his side table drawer, on his side of the bed.

"What's that?"

"A little something."

Travis walked the distance between them. "What are you hiding from me?"

"Nothing. Come on, let's join the family, Mom cooked lasagna." Joe closed the drawer and walked to the door.

Travis opened the drawer and drew the contents out of the little bag, reading in disbelief. "Personal lubricant? Condoms? What are these for? Why are you buying this stuff?"

Joe turned from the door. "It is what it says it is. Even you have enough imagination to know what it's for." He stood in front of Travis. "We're going to need it, sooner or later."

"No way. We don't need any of this."

Joe recovered the rectangular boxes from his hand, and put them back in the drawer. "So you're no longer afraid of getting one of my STDs?"

“Are you sick?”

“No. After I left Matt, I had myself checked for everything, and last week I got my last recheck. I’m clean. Can you say the same, Mr. Anderson?”

“Of course, I’m clean. Why are we having this conversation? Ironies aside, I already apologized for the way I treated you that first day.”

“Whatever. Simply forget what’s inside the drawer.”

Travis passed by him saying, “Finally, we agree about something. I’m going to check on the children. They are already in bed. Why don’t you go and eat some dinner?”

Joe grabbed his hand. “I’m a natural born sinner, Travis. If you stay next to me, you will become one too.”

“It’s not going to happen. So far, we’re handling ourselves well.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Travis rescued his hand and left the room.

Later, much later...

“Travis... Travis...”

He could hear Joe’s voice in his sleep, and woke to find himself alone in the bed. The room was semi-dark, only the tiny lights from the garden providing some brightness, but he could see Joe wasn’t there. He moved over to Joe’s side of the bed, waited and listened. He heard it again. It was Joe calling him; it was his voice, very low, like a moan.

Travis got out of the bed, fearing the worst; maybe he got suddenly sick or something. He checked the monitor: according to the image on the little screen, everything was calm downstairs. He walked to the office and it was empty. Then he went to the bathroom, the door was closed, but he could see the lights were off. Travis heard Joe’s voice again, so he went in and put the lights on.

It took a few seconds for him to realize what was going on. Joe was sitting on the side of the tub, completely nude and with one leg bent over the border of it. Travis could see Joe’s erect cock.

Joe was breathing heavily, his eyes closed, his lips quivering. When he realized the interruption, he opened his eyes and looked at Travis in surprise,

but recovered very fast. The look in his eyes changed to pure lust. Travis stared in awestricken silence. Nobody had looked at him like that before. It was like asking silently to join him.

Travis tried to look into Joe's dark eyes only, but he couldn't help his eyes roaming over his tanned and muscular body. There were parts where his skin was lighter due to the lack of sun exposure and others were darker, like his nipples and his balls were coppery, while his cock was slightly darker still. Travis could clearly see the dilated veins across its silky surface and the cock head gleamed with pre-cum.

In all, Travis had to admit that there was something beautiful and wild about him.

"I'm sorry," he said still in awe by what he interrupted.

"Come here, Travis."

"Never."

Joe simply continued pumping his cock.

"Joe, you can't... You shouldn't be doing..."

"Why? Haven't you done this?"

"No, because I know..."

"Don't say it. If you're not going to help me, get the fuck out of here. And close the damn door."

Travis did just that. He went back to the bed and covered himself with the blankets. Joe didn't hold his squall this time. Travis heard very clearly when he climaxed, saying his name. No faking this time and no joke. For Joe, this pleasure issue was very real.

Travis was feeling too many emotions together, but the one which bothered him the most was this thing between his legs, which all of a sudden had a mind of its own. He closed his legs as tightly as he could and tried to think about other things, but the image of Joe naked, pleasuring himself, was too vivid.

Seeing what he'd only imagined before touched him deeply. He'd tried to ignore Joe's body since the night they agreed to the challenge, when he had sensed Joe growing hard above him and his own body reacting to it. He'd panicked and responded in the only way he knew. Now, he felt sorry for talking to Joe in that manner, after he had been so generous with him, and kind to his children.

Although, it was one thing to know Joe was attracted to him, and another to see with his own eyes the effect he had on Joe, to hear him uttering his name with such passion.

And, he could not erase from his mind the image of Joe's body, nor the feelings that the contact with that body aroused in him, and the curiosity. His own penis looked different, and, truth to be told, he'd never seen another one up close before, never mind one that was also erect.

He heard the water running and later, when Joe got out of the bathroom to get dressed, he watched how unlike other times, Joe paraded around naked, gathering the clothes he was going to wear for the day. It was a vision of sensuality. At one point, Travis could see Joe's figure against the light of the sunrise. When Joe felt his eyes on him, he turned around and Travis could have sworn Joe's eyes were lit up with fire.

"I know you're awake." Joe finished getting dressed and sat on the bed, Travis moved away instinctively. "Were you ever found touching yourself?"

Travis nodded, but didn't say anything else. Joe breathed deeply before he continued, "If you were told that doing such a thing is a dirty sin, it's about time you scratch that from your mind, or you'll never be happy."

Travis rose to Joe's level, and without looking him in the eyes said, "That's easy to say."

"Travis, you pride yourself on being a man. Well, this is part of what being a man is."

"If you're a pervert, yes, it is."

"No, there is nothing wrong in doing it, Travis. And stop calling me pervert, you don't know what a real pervert is." He shook his head in frustration. "There is so much you need to learn."

"I forbid you from saying my name while you do that. Why do you have to say my name? Can't you just do it, in silence?"

"Do you know why I'm saying your name while doing it? Because I'm imagining making love to you."

"Please stop doing that," Travis mumbled.

"I can't. It's the only way I'm able to sleep next to you, without losing control."

“So that’s what you’re doing before getting into bed?”

“Exactly.”

“Do you have to do it in the morning too?”

“Not always. Sometimes the urge in the morning is more intense than any other time of the day.”

“Are all men like you? Why am I different? I don’t have those needs.”

Joe thought for a moment. “You need to be honest with yourself. You can hide your desires from me or anybody else. The fact they are hidden, doesn’t mean they cease to exist.”

“Is there something wrong with me?”

“I’m not a doctor, Travis. But one thing I can tell, from something I’ve read. If your problem were biological, you would look very different than you do. I think your body is fine, the problem is up here.” Joe traced a path with his index finger from Travis’s forehead to his heart. “...continues here... to down here.” He quickly ended with the lightest brush over Travis’s semi-hard penis covered by the pajama pants.

Travis withdrew as fast as he could. Joe smirked as if he knew Travis would do that. He shrugged and walked to the door saying, “I better go, I’m already late. Have a great day.”

Travis suddenly said, “Joe, I won the challenge.”

Joe let his hand drop from the doorknob and turned around slowly. Travis raised a hand and mimicked the pathway of Joe’s touching. “See? You touched me intimately while we were in bed.”

“Fuck!” Joe shook his head in uncertainty. “So much for controlling myself night after night, to lose for something so silly.”

“You were the one who made up the challenge and made up the rules too.”

“Yes, I accept my defeat, you won. We’ll talk about it, tonight. Now I must go.”

Travis spent the whole day thinking about the incident over and over again.

Chapter 11

That night, after a long working day, Joe didn't want to go to his room, knowing Travis would not be there. But sooner or later he would have to face the fact. When he got to the door which separated his side of the house from the rest, he heard voices. *Travis, Mary and Mom?* Joe thought the worst. If his mom found Travis sleeping in his bed...

Joe thought back to the day, years ago when he'd made a confession to his father about his sexuality, and the old man had been disappointed and told him to be discreet and never to shame their family. And so far, Joe had complied, which had been easy, because he'd never met a guy whose hand he felt like holding while walking down the street. Not even Matt, who preferred being closeted, anyway.

Until Travis, who inspired him to shout his feelings from the rooftops.

"What's going on here?"

He ran into the little hall and found they were all inside the room in front of his sanctuary, the so-called home office only Travis used occasionally. He felt relief when he saw his mother smiling at him. Whatever it was, it was not the worst.

"Joe. Speaking of the devil, I'm glad you are here. Listen, we would like your opinion about something."

"My opinion?"

"Forget it, Mom. He doesn't have a say in this."

"What are you talking about, Mary?" Knowing his sister, whenever she said that it meant the opposite.

"Since I'm getting married next month, we've been reorganizing the compound, and we're taking over the part of the house you're not using. Now it belongs to Travis and the kids."

"What? And I don't have a say?"

"No. You keep your sanctuary; the rest will be Travis's." Mary's tone was final. She really meant it.

"So he's getting the seventy-five percent of my side?"

“A side you have never used.”

Travis suddenly found his voice. “It will only be until my home is ready, Joe.”

Mary moved her head in denial. “As a matter of fact, your house is ready.”

“Why didn’t you say so before, Mary? Why are we still here?” Travis looked at her surprised.

“Travis, that other place is your house, but this is your home. Mom and I decided you should stay with us, as long as you want, of course. Your whole family had been adopted by ours.”

Joe wasn’t happy. He knew Mary was pushing them to make up their minds, especially Travis.

“Nothing would make me happier, than staying here with you guys,” Travis said. “But I don’t want to take advantage of your family. Especially because you don’t want to take any money from me.”

“Travis, if you want to do something that will benefit our big new family, use your cash to invest in Joe’s alternative energy company. There is a future in that, something to tell our grandchildren about.”

By Travis’s understanding smile, Joe knew that he bought every single word Mary said—pity his sister could not help in the bed issues. He quickly scratched that idea before she could read his mind and start suggesting in that area too.

“That is a great idea, Mary. Joe and I will talk about it.”

Mary hugged Travis and he embraced her, expressing genuine affection. It was a sight Joe couldn’t bear. Travis had never been like that with him.

“Do as you please,” he said. “As long as my sanctuary isn’t part of it. Good night, everyone.”

He kissed his mom and was leaving when Mary ran to him.

“Hey. Big brother, where’s my kiss?”

He stopped and turned to face her. She pulled his head down to kiss him, while whispering in his ear, “Don’t worry, I’m still your secret weapon.”

He kissed her back, grinned and went for a walk, and didn’t come back until he was so tired he could barely walk.

So Travis won. Damn it. He would have to be his friend, sharing brotherly love indefinitely.

When he entered his room, he found Travis sitting on his side of the bed, like all the previous nights, holding his pillow. In moments like that he really looked more childish than usual.

“What are you doing here? The contest is over. You won.”

“I forgot my pillow.”

“Did you hear me? You won.”

“In my opinion, the score is tied.”

“A tie?” Joe sat on the bed, astonished. “What are you talking about, Travis? The rules were very clear. If you have any feelings for me, I won.”

“It depends.”

“Explain yourself, please. And this time, no more games. What exactly is on your mind and... in your heart? I deserve to know.”

Travis held the pillow even tighter, closed his eyes, like in a silent and small prayer, and said, “It is not easy for me...”

“You can have the bed, if you wish. I’ll have it moved to your side of the house tomorrow,” Joe said.

Travis looked hurt. “This bed without you is like any other.”

“Travis, I can’t take it anymore. Be honest or get out of here.”

“I can’t put it into words, but I’ll try. Since I moved over here, I think I’m learning... what love is. I’ve never had more unconditional love in my life. Sophia loved me, but she was just like me. She died without telling me she cared about me, though I knew she did. But for the first time I feel loved. This is what I feel for this whole family.”

When Joe didn’t say anything, Travis sighed deeply before adding, “Now, about you... for you... I just feel lost when you aren’t nearby. I like to sleep, knowing you are there, next to me. I enjoy when we talk, when we play with the kids, when we are all together. This will be the best holidays ever. Mary and I...”

Joe interrupted him, “Yes, Mary and you. If you need a friend, you have her.”

“Are you jealous?”

“No, Travis. I’m envious. My little sister has a bond with you I’ll never have. You don’t mind hugging her—I guess you feel safe, because she doesn’t have a penis.”

“I want us to be friends too.”

“Listen, you won the challenge. We will be friends, whether I like it or not.”

“Can I continue sleeping with you?”

“Damn it, Travis. Why do you pretend?”

“When I said it was a tie, it’s because I’m willing to have some kind of relationship with you.”

“Some kind of what? Are you proposing a platonic love? If that can be called love.”

Travis nodded; by then, Joe knew that it was because he couldn’t express his feelings. And Joe needed to know if there were any real feelings at all.

“No. I can’t have that type of relationship with anybody.”

“Why not? We’ve been fine so far.”

“You’ve been fine. I’ve been going through hell and back... Let me see if I can find a good an example... yeah. Do you like pizza?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Imagine for a moment, you’ve never tasted pizza in your life. And you see a picture of a piece of pizza. Since you’ve never tasted it, will you crave it?”

“I guess... no, probably not.” Travis shook his head as if he didn’t consider that a good example.

“Sex is like pizza for me. And you are the tastiest piece of pizza. I know how it tastes, how it smells, and I crave it beyond sanity. I knew as soon as I saw you that I wanted you.” Joe started to pace in the hope of cooling himself off. “You, on the other hand, never even smelled it. So it’s easy for you. No, I can’t tie myself to a sexless relationship. I want you to be with me—the whole me.”

Travis’s expression was so depressing that Joe sat down next to him and suddenly added, “I will give you all the time and patience you need to grow

bonded to me, but you have to let me touch you, and you have to be a willing participant.”

Travis shook his head and got out of the bed. He began to walk toward the door, and a part of Joe left with him. Then unexpectedly, Travis retraced his steps and stood in front of Joe, who was still sitting on the bed. Then he sat next to him. It was the closest they had been since the day they started the challenge.

Joe lowered his head, like a defeated warrior. Travis put his arm around Joe's shoulders, and rested his head against Joe's. His voice was one Joe had never heard, it sounded raw, and it took a few seconds to understand why—Travis wasn't hiding his real feelings anymore.

“I'm sorry, Joe. I don't know how I dared to even ask that of you.”

“Are you gay or not?”

Travis held Joe harder as he answered. “I'm a man who likes another man—you. Does that mean I'm gay? If so, I guess I am.”

“Travis, what do you want to do?”

“I've never wanted to be next to anyone as much as you. Can we give it a try?”

“With pizza or without pizza?” Joe might have been using a funny example, but he was deadly serious.

“Do you need to ask? You know it's not easy for me. I can't promise anything. Even therapy failed with me.”

“Did you seek help?” Joe was surprised.

“Yes. Sophia and I were having issues, you know, couple's issues. Someone suggested that we see a marriage counselor and this person recommended a sex therapist to us.”

“Did it work? I mean, were you able to enjoy making love to Sophia regularly?”

“I guess we got our money's worth. We got Ella shortly after that.”

“What? Did you guys use in vitro fertilization to get Ella? I agree, that was a great investment.”

“If that was a joke, it was a very tacky one.”

“I’m sorry. Let’s try a different way. Are you willing to be educated by me?”

“Sexually speaking? The pizza way?”

“Travis, no more games. I think I can help you—I can do things a therapist can’t. Your feelings for me are a good start, but you need to do your part.

“Can I stay?”

“Do you mean in—”

“Our bed.”

“You may be asexual, but you’re good at teasing like no other. Fine, we’ll try it.”

Travis smiled and was looking at him with a new light on those blue eyes.

“What is it?” Joe made a face.

Travis didn’t talk. He moved closer, observing Joe’s features—his eyes, his nose, his mouth. He raised a hand and with a tender caress, he cleared the hair falling on Joe’s forehead. He was so close. Joe watched, thinking how it was going to be painful, this new phase in their relationship. Therefore, he was surprised when Travis closed his eyes, lowered his head and kissed him.

It was the most innocent kiss anybody had ever given him. He simply pressed his lips against him softly, like a wet butterfly. Joe kissed him back in the same way, only using his lips, alternating sucking his upper and lower lips in a tender manner. Travis replicated the movement, and soon, they were kissing with passion. When Joe’s tongue thrust past Travis’s lips and into his mouth, he stopped the kiss.

“I think that is enough for today,” Travis said.

“Tease. I’m going to take a shower.”

“If you’re doing that, I’m going to see if everything is okay with the children.”

“I’m not doing what you think. I’m too tired.”

“I’ll be right back. I’m just going to check on them.”

As Travis passed him, Joe held out his arm and let his hand slowly skim over Travis’s muscular forearm until he grabbed his fingers. “I know I can

make you happy. I understand your concern, but I want a new life with you. I want to give myself to you in ways that I've never given to anyone.”

Travis nodded and left in a rush, but Joe could swear his touch affected him somehow.

Chapter 12

Travis kept going and entered the kids' room. They were sleeping like little angels; he gently put a blanket over Richard, who always kicked his covers off. Edward was quieter.

He carefully walked into Ella's room next. She was deeply asleep, and so quiet, that he recalled those days he would keep checking to be sure she was breathing.

He sat on a chair, observing her with a meditative expression. It was amazing how fast children grew; he could still remember how tiny they had been, especially Ella, who had been born prematurely. He smiled, but silent tears fell while he recalled the past two years. He had dedicated all those years to raising them without thinking about himself. The only person who had been there for him, after Sophia's death, was Nadine.

"I'm sorry, Nadine," he said, as if she could hear him. "I can't tell you. You would never understand how I feel. I can't go to church after what I've been doing. Last time I was there, I felt they would hate the person I've become."

He thought back, remembering how mad she was with him, because he had stopped going to church—especially, when he couldn't come up with a good explanation. She even offered to watch the children for free, if he attended at least one service a week.

He stopped going to church the same day he began sharing the bed with Joe. It was hard to make a choice, but he couldn't continue being the same person anymore. He wasn't the same. He'd changed so much, since he saw Joe for the first time. Now the word "sin" had a new meaning. He could see that a sinner could be a person who followed God's commandments, but failed to love his fellow human beings, discriminating against them for simply loving one another.

Like in his case—he had done nothing wrong—only fallen in love for the first time, with another man. If being Christian meant condemning such a thing, he preferred not to be one anymore.

"Now, Lord, my relationship with you won't change. And as always, I will continue serving you, helping others through my job. Thanks for allowing the Holy Spirit to protect my children. Under your Grace."

When he left Ella's room, he found Mary pacing in the living room. Surprised he asked, "What's the matter?"

"Have you been crying?" She stared at him with wide-open eyes.

"Yes, a little bit, but don't worry. I was praying."

"If you ever need to talk, I'm here for you," she offered, then asked, "Do you know where Joe is?"

"I think he's taking a shower. Why?"

"I knocked at his door, and I got no answer. Evil Matt is here."

"What's he doing here at this hour?"

"I have no idea, but I'm sure he's up to no good. Let's go. He's after Joe."

Travis followed her with determination. "This time I'll break his nose for sure."

In the hall to Joe's room, Travis paused. "Please wait here... in case he is not dressed."

Travis entered the room looking for Joe, who was coming out of the bathroom with only a towel around his hips.

"Matt is here. Mary is outside, waiting for you to get dressed."

"Matt? What's he doing here?"

Mary knocked on the door, and entered without waiting.

"He's still—" Travis began.

"It's fine, Travis. I've seen him like this before. Joe, you'd better settle this once and for all. He can't keep popping up like this. He'll be here any moment."

"I will settle it, Mary. Entertain him while I get dressed. Travis, please stay in here. I don't want Matt to see you."

"Why not. Are you ashamed of me, or—"

Joe pulled him close, kissing him quickly on the lips and keeping him at his side, while he told Mary, "Little sister, Travis and me, we are together."

"I'm so happy. Congratulations."

Travis was all red. He simply looked at Mary and smiled. She left to keep Matt at bay; they could hear hers and Matt's voices outside.

“Why are you so afraid of him?” Travis asked, while Joe finished dressing in shorts and a T-shirt.

“It’s not about me, but you. You have no idea how cruel Matt can be. Please stay inside. It doesn’t matter what you hear. I’ll be talking with him in your living room.”

“Mine?”

“It’s in the part of the house Mary just gave you.”

With that, Joe left, closing the door behind him. Travis stayed in bed, trying to concentrate on the book he was reading, but after a few minutes, went to see if he could hear or see anything.

Joe confronted Matt, “Why are you here at this hour, Matt?”

Mary excused herself and left.

“There is something I need to tell you. It can’t wait until tomorrow.”

“It’s almost midnight. Go ahead,” Joe prompted. “What is it?”

“I’m leaving tomorrow morning. I came to say goodbye.”

“I’m glad that you finally understand that there is no chance I’ll ever be with you again.”

“Please don’t say that. I tried to get close to you, you know that, but you keep avoiding me. Give me one more night, and I’ll show you what you’re missing. If you still want me gone, I’ll leave in the morning.”

He was as charming as usual, but his bright blue eyes made Joe remember another person—the person whom he loved now.

“Stop wasting your time and mine. And stop showing up unexpectedly.”

Matt hugged him saying, “Please forgive me. I know I was selfish, even cruel. But these months without you have been hell.”

Joe opened his mouth to reply and Matt kissed him. It was the kiss of an expert lover. Joe forgot how those kisses could drive him nuts. He found himself kissing back, and in his mind he thought *it will be the last kiss we share*. But Matt took full advantage of the chance; he knew where he had to touch Joe to make him react, how to move against him.

When Joe realized he'd fallen into a trap, he pushed him away, but it was too late. He heard the door, as Travis closed it with a loud bang. He probably saw the whole thing; Joe could only imagine how that kiss and fondle would look from a distance.

"Oops. Do you have company, Joe?" Matt's smile was from hell.

"Get out of my life, Matt. Yes, I'm with someone, and I'm glad we kissed, because you showed me the difference between both of you."

"I'm glad too. I don't care if you're having fun with someone. You proved how you feel for me. Give me one night and that person will be history tomorrow."

"No way. If I have to choose between an innocent kiss from him and a night with you, I choose Travis's kiss."

"Travis? Don't tell me that Mr. Straight is my rival."

"Not so straight anymore. And no, he is not your rival—he is my partner. What was between you and me is over. You took me by surprise, but the truth is, I don't feel anything for you. The magic is gone, Matt."

Matt eyes turned dark blue, and Joe knew what that meant. The next second he was racing him upstairs and down the hall. Matt stormed into his bedroom, finding Travis reading on the bed. When he saw Matt, his pained expression changed to hatred.

"You little whore. I knew you were going to take him away from me."

Joe grabbed Matt before he got to Travis. "Travis, please stay calm. Matt is leaving right now."

Matt struggled in Joe's grip. "Let me go. This time I will beat the hell out of him. He won't take me by surprise."

Travis got to his feet. "Let him free, Joe. This time I will break more than his nose for sure."

Joe had to stand between both of them, like a referee. "Nobody is beating anyone. Matt, please go."

Joe tried to talk with Travis. He could see the pain so deep in his eyes that he was feeling it too. He knew how it felt being betrayed. Even if it had been only a kiss, he could understand Travis's outrage. He knew it was better to wait

until Matt was gone, but he couldn't allow Travis to believe that he had been unfaithful any longer.

"I'm sorry, Travis. He took me by surprise."

"Don't say anything. I understand your needs, and I know my limits. You can go and do whatever you feel like doing with him." Travis paused to breathe deeply before adding, "I saw you both together. I doubt I could ever behave that way."

Matt asked, "May I say something?"

"Why bother asking? You're going to say it anyway," Joe accused him.

"Listen, Travis, don't take it personally, but Joe is too much for you to handle. I think it would be better if you give him up now."

Travis looked at Joe furiously and in pain. "Did you tell him?"

Joe cried out, "No." Then, more calmly, he advised Travis, "He's using his poison again. Don't listen."

Matt smiled, satisfied. "No, Travis, he didn't say a thing. Let's say I've have an expert eye to see certain details. Besides, I lived with him for six years of my life, I know him very well. When I got here, you were reading in bed, dressed in ugly pajamas... big mistake. If you want to keep this man, you need to satisfy him at least twice a day, and he'll still wake you up in the middle of the night. You'll never be able to fulfill his needs. When I kissed him I felt his hunger."

Travis listened and then replied, "If he was so satisfied with you, why did he leave you?"

"I made a mistake. We all do."

"Matt, you should leave now," Joe said calmly. "I'm being nice, but if you keep trying to break my relationship with Travis, you will not be able to visit this house anymore, even if I have to tell my mother about us."

"She knows. So don't try and blackmail with it."

"What?"

"I told her. When you left me, I came to New Jersey looking for you. You were traveling, promoting your business. I was devastated. So I told her everything about us."

“Everything? I doubt it. Mom would have never accepted that.”

“I told her the good part. She knows how much we love each other. She knows how much I suffered all these months without you—how much I still love you. Indeed, without Christine’s friendship, I don’t know how I would have survived losing you. She was the one who suggested I move closer and try again to win your forgiveness.”

Joe was frozen. He would never have expected that from his mother. Of course, only God knew what version Matt had told her of their story.

Reacting, Joe dragged Matt to the door saying, “Enough. You’d better get out of here, before I lose the little control I still have. All those years together, I thought I knew you. Oh My God, you are—”

“Vicious,” Travis, interrupted him walking toward them. “You know, Matt, the word poisonous was invented for people like you. And the worst part is that being gay, you trash every decent, honest, loving gay person out there. You make us all look bad.”

“Us? Ooh. So we are out of the closet already. Good for you. But it takes much more than that to keep Joe interested. I’m sure that I won’t have to wait much longer. He’s already showing signs of desperation, and he’ll soon be bored with you.”

“Damn it, come on...” Joe opened the door to see Matt out, and turned back to Travis. “I’ll be right back, I want to be sure he leaves without speaking to the rest of the family.”

On their way out, Joe stopped at his home office and pushed Matt into a chair. “I want to be sure, that you will leave us alone forever.”

“And give up on you?”

Joe opened a drawer in his desk and put the computer on. He pulled out a disc. “This is only a copy of many files I have, the originals are in a safe in a Manhattan bank.”

“A copy of what?”

Joe played the DVD and soon Matt was looking at the screen with wide-open eyes.

“When I suspected that you were taking guys back to our place and you denied it, I installed a surveillance system.”

“You recorded my encounters?”

“How do you think I was able to walk in and catch you in the middle of the act?” The video showed Matt going down on a young man and it would soon be more explicit.

Joe didn't look at the images, they were still painful to watch—not because he cared about Matt, but for the betrayal. “You mentioned that I might try to blackmail you with my own mother. That's nothing compared to this. This is blackmail.” He leaned over and held Matt's chin in a harsh manner. “If you ever get close to me or my family, and that includes Travis, I will mail a copy of this and the other files I have to your own family. We know that both your grandfather and your father would disown you for less than this.”

Matt shook the hand from his face. “You wouldn't...”

“Try me, and people will finally learn who you truly are.” Joe stopped the player and jerked Matt out of the chair to his feet. “And before you leave my town forever, you will put that house for sale. That way, you will never need to come back. Are we clear?”

“Yes,” Matt muttered.

“Let's go.” Joe didn't free him until he was sure the man was off the farm, and hopefully out of his life.

Chapter 13

Travis watched as Joe took Matt with him, then walked to the windows, looking at the darkness outside; almost the same as his soul. It was only when Joe returned and tried to put his arm around his shoulders that Travis moved. He shrugged Joe's arm away.

"Don't touch me. And if you want to sleep next to me, go and take another shower. And remember to brush your teeth and your tongue very well."

In a surprising response, Joe said, "I feel that I need it too."

By the time Joe opened the bathroom door, Travis had made up his mind and started talking straight away.

"I'm not giving up either, Joe. Do you want to go with me to the town hall tomorrow?"

"Town hall? For what?" Joe asked in awe.

"Do you want to continue sleeping with me?" Travis asked with a determined expression.

"What a question! I just gave up a night of lust for you. Of course I want to sleep with you. I can't live without your snoring."

"I don't snore. You do."

"Why are we going to the town hall?" Joe asked, his expectancy obvious.

"To file a domestic partnership. I hope you know what that is." Travis wondered if this was the moment he would confirm how much Joe truly cared about him, or not.

"Travis, of course, I know. Do you? We will be getting out of the closet. And in your case, I'm not sure if you even know where the closet is." Joe smiled and stared at him.

Travis sighed with relief, because Joe didn't refuse. "I know. A domestic partnership is the nearest to a marriage we can get in the state of New Jersey."

"Aren't you supposed to get on your knee and give me a ring?" When Travis didn't get the joke, he asked, "Will I get any pizza?"

If that charming smile was an answer, Travis couldn't ask for more. With a shy smile of his own he replied, "All you want, day and night. In the middle of the night too. You can use your beloved personal lubricant as needed."

“Really?” The simple question expressed the amazement Joe experienced with this unexpected change of heart on Travis’s part.

Joe noticed a side of Travis he’d never witnessed before; a determination he hadn’t perceived. It was interesting, in the middle of this situation he had let his barrier down, and Joe could now see a passionate person for the first time.

He was sure, if he tried, that Travis probably would give himself to him that same night. But his love for him was too much to simply take advantage of his rage. Besides, it was like Matt delivering him into his arms, and he hated the idea of Matt doing anything for him.

“Travis, are you serious? Or are you doing this because you are upset with Matt?” Joe placed both hands on Travis’s shoulders, expecting a rejection, but this time Travis didn’t push him away. On the contrary, he got closer.

“He helped me make up my mind when I saw how you reacted to him. At first, I felt I would never be able to replace him. But then I realized I can do better than him.” He looked him straight in the eyes. “I will fight for my man. I love you, Joe.”

Possession never sounded as tender before. “I love you too, Travis.” Joe hugged him tight. “Feeling better?”

“Hmm.” Travis nodded against his shoulder.

“Do you still want to sign that contract?” Joe needed to be sure Travis wasn’t acting in the heat of rage.

“Do you?”

“Of course. But there are too many appointments pending, I’ll ask Mary to reschedule the ones from the day after tomorrow, and I will go anywhere you want and sign any papers you need me to.”

“Then we are going the day after tomorrow. Joe, I’ve never felt what I’m feeling now.”

Joe hugged him even closer and later that night, they slept in each other’s arms. Matt had no idea what he had awakened.

The next afternoon, Travis came home furious. He sent a text to Mary asking her to please look after the children for another hour, and went for a walk into the woods. Mary called Joe and he came home immediately.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t enter the main house, he went to yours, and changed clothes and has been gone ever since.”

Joe took one of his mother’s fabric shopping bags, because getting his backpack was wasting time, and put water bottles, a flashlight and some snack bars in it. Being late November it was getting darker sooner, and Travis didn’t know the area. Galloway might look modern in some areas, while in others, it was like a jungle; Joe had known this all his life.

“He could get lost, Joe. Take the rifle with you, just in case,” his father suggested. Of course, Travis didn’t know there were bears and wildcats in the area, or maybe he simply forgot about it.

Joe also put on his winter jacket and put a sweater, extra gloves and hats in the bag. His mother followed him and handed over an emergency kit. “Joe, do you think he has mental issues? He’s so nice most of the time, but he has these episodes where he reacts like this.”

“I’m not sure, Mom. But I don’t think he’s crazy. Something must have happened.”

Joe took off in the direction Mary told him Travis had taken, and he asked a few neighbors if they had seen anyone like him. Thank God they had. It was unusual for people to take walks at the end of the day into the woods. Apparently, Travis had kept himself walking along the inhabited area of the township. It took nearly an hour for Joe to catch up with him, and by then it was almost dark.

Travis was following one of the side roads, but by the way he moved, he didn’t know where he was going. Joe knew the feeling; he and Mary had got lost in the same area years ago, and he had been scared, especially for her. There were houses nearby, but one didn’t know how someone would react to an unexpected guest, so they had kept walking until Joe found the main road again and a gas station from where he called their father.

“Travis?”

He turned around and the surprised expression was replaced by one of relief.

“Joe, thank God. I didn’t know this area was so large.”

“It is. Let’s go home.”

“Do you know the way?”

“Yes. It will be slow to find in the dark, and there are no sidewalks, so be careful to not get run over by the few cars passing by.”

“Sure.”

Joe pulled the flashlight out and started walking back.

“Here, drink some water and eat one of these.” Joe handed Travis a snack bar.

“Thanks.” Travis was wearing a thin jacket and when his hand touched Joe's, he felt how cold he was getting. The temperature was dropping fast.

“I brought these because I thought you might need them.” Joe handed Travis the sweater, a pair of gloves and a hat. He put them on with trembling hands.

“Please hold the flashlight, I need to send a text to inform everyone I found you and we're on our way back.”

They walked in silence for a long time, and after getting to an area where walking was easier, Joe asked, “Why did you take off like that?”

“I needed to be alone, and in the past I used to take walks by the beach.”

“Well, the woods and the beach aren't the same. I hope by now you know better.” Joe was glad he'd found him, but concerned about Travis's behavior.

“Yes. I soon realized that. I'm sorry. I couldn't believe that I was getting lost in the middle of a town.”

He sounded so regretful that Joe decided not to claim anything. “Don't worry, it happened to me. It's a big place and the properties are built irregularly. This part of the town is rural.”

“Yeah, I learned it firsthand. I found a few streets with dead ends, all ending in the woods.”

“You haven't answered me. Why did you need to be alone?”

“I needed to think, because I have an important choice to make.”

Turning the flashlight off, Joe said, “May I know what it is? We can stop here—we're about ten minutes from home.”

“You know the position I have at the bank.”

“Yes—kind of important for someone so young.”

“Yes. I earned it. I worked the extra mile since the first day I joined the bank, right out of college.”

“And?” Joe was worried that Travis had lost his temper with a customer or something like that.

“The owner called me this afternoon to his home. You know it’s a local family bank, very old and traditional.”

He paused and Joe didn’t say anything, but he could see the anguish in Travis’s face as he continued. “One of the customers—a very rich one—complained about the general manager having a double life. Essentially living with another man.”

“That’s you. You’re the general manager.”

“Yes. The owner asked me if it was true and told me to give him an answer tomorrow morning, he suggested that I consider well my answer, because he can’t have someone who is in a homosexual relationship running his bank.”

“How did he know?”

“Does the last name McAlester tell you anything?”

Joe uttered a curse and nodded. “Matt is behind this. I’m sorry, Travis, I’d never expected him to go to those extremes. I’m going to have to talk to him.”

“I tried to talk with him myself, but he’s gone. The house even has a ‘For Sale’ sign,” Travis said, and Joe hoped it was the last they ever heard about his dastardly ex. Travis continued to explain. “Matt has been spreading rumors and the manager he told about us is someone older than me, who has always resented getting orders from someone younger, and couldn’t wait to inform the bank owner about it.”

As they were speaking, they had moved closer to one another and now were leaning on each other. Joe hugged Travis and didn’t give a damn if anybody who drove by saw them embrace.

“Travis, whatever you decide to do, you can count on me, okay?”

“I know. And I made up my mind already. I don’t want to work in a hostile environment like that.”

“Hostile? I think it’s discriminating, but hostile?”

“I felt like that a few hours ago. It was as if I’d never known that person, the owner, who in the past praised me so much and seemed to appreciate my work.”

“Well, homophobic people can be rude, but he gave you a way out.”

“Yes. I could lie, I could walk in tomorrow and make any excuse and he would believe it, or make me think he does.” Travis stepped away a few inches and tried to look Joe in the face regardless of the semi-darkness around them. “But I don’t want to lie. I’ve changed. I’m no longer the man he hired, and I do share my life with another man. Above all, I’m not ashamed of it.”

“Thanks for making the right choice.” Joe met his brief kiss halfway. “Are you going to quit?”

“Yes. Effective immediately. He will be mad as hell, and I will not get references, but I’m pretty sure that either way I’m finished as a banker in this area.”

“That’s unfair, you know.”

“I know, although times are changing for gay employees, and hopefully will continue to do so. I could legally fight discrimination, but I don’t want to work with people who despise me.” He paused and with shyness, he asked, “Joe, do you think I can work with you, in that solar energy venture of yours?”

Joe smiled, the idea of suggesting such a thing would have never crossed his mind. “Sure, but the income and the conditions will be very different from what you have at the bank.”

“I know and I don’t care.”

“Travis, you used the correct word, venture, is what I’m starting. It will be a lot of work and...”

“As long as we are together, I don’t mind the conditions,” Travis interrupted him, resolute.

“I’m texting Mary to put the children to bed, because we need to talk with my parents.”

Travis tensed and asked, “Don’t you think it’s too soon? I mean, what if they don’t agree?”

Joe pushed the send key and looked up. “Then we move out.”

“Are you serious? That would kill your dad.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that, but I think they already suspect something is going on. We have to come clean, regardless of the consequences.”

A gloved hand touched his arm. “Joe, I’ve never felt this way. For the first time in my life, everything I say, do or feel is in harmony. All I want is to start a new life with you.”

“Are we having pizza in that new life?” Joe couldn’t help it.

“After last night, I’m craving it too.” Joe couldn’t care less if anybody was looking. He leaned forward and kissed Travis, and for the first time, Travis’s lips parted to welcome him.

Joe stopped the kiss. “What about the kids? How will they take that we’re more than friends?”

“Believe it or not, that’s the easiest part of our new lives. They know a few families at their school with same-sex parents. I will have to listen to a chorus of ‘I told you so, Dad’, because I was the one preaching against two-daddy and two-mommy families. I’m ready to take more of my own medicine. I guess I deserve it after all.”

They headed toward the house holding hands, and Joe said, “Travis, let me talk to my parents alone. This might be a difficult conversation.”

“I understand. I hope they will understand us too. I’ll be waiting for you at home.”

Chapter 14

When Travis got home, he found Mary trying to get the children into bed. They had all been worried about him. He apologized and promised to never do such a thing again.

Sometimes it was hard to know who was more father-like, Richard or Edward. After Mary left, Travis had to hear their team speech about his behavior and how much the family was concerned because of him.

“It’s not only us, Dad. We now have more people to take into consideration. They truly care about us, you know?” Edward said.

Travis breathed and thought it was a good moment to tell them about Joe and him.

“Guys, I know our family has increased. As a matter of fact, I want to tell you about—” Travis paused and looked at them. He couldn’t tell them; somehow it was so hard to talk about Joe and their relationship.

“Why did you stop?” Edward asked. They were seated on the couch, in the living room, one boy on each of side of their dad.

“It’s not easy to tell you about this, but Joe and I will be—” Travis stopped again. Then he felt Edward patting his shoulder.

“I think we know, Dad. Are we going to be like the Browns?”

Travis nodded. The Browns were a same-sex couple, whose kids attended the same school as his boys. And the kids always cited them as an example of a happy family. Not because they were same sex-couple, but because they were “happy” and the boys liked the idea of having a family like them.

“You see, Dad? I told you, it doesn’t matter if they have two daddies. They are a happy family.”

“Yes, Richard. Now I understand.”

“If that means we will be living here forever, I’m happy already. We like it here, Dad,” Edward said.

After that, they had a bunch of questions, and for a moment Travis was concerned they knew he had been sharing the bed with Joe, but in spite of their maturity when it came to dealing with him, his kids still had an innocence to them that was touching.

After they went to bed, while he waited for Joe, Travis decided to take a shower and do some research about domestic partnerships. He tied the robe around his waist, sitting in front of the computer.

“Oh. No. Those politicians... why do they have to be so wicked?” he said, reading the screen.

“Who’s been wicked?” Joe was standing right next to him.

“Joe. How did it go?” Travis asked.

He shook his head, saying, “Well, I just had a very interesting conversation with my parents and sister... and couldn’t wait to tell you.”

Travis held his breath.

Joe winked at him and smiled. “Mom is planning a little reception for us.”

“Wow. How did she take the news?”

“She said a couple of things—wouldn’t be her if she didn’t—but she accepted it very well. She likes you a lot. I think you owe Richard and Edward, big time. She has grown very attached to the kids.”

“And your father?”

“His position was surprising and touching at the same time.” He breathed and cleared his throat. “Making a long story short, he knows that there is not much time for him to spend with us. He basically doesn’t care, if you’re a man or a woman. He is glad of any time he can spend with our family, and also that I have found someone to love and who loves me.” Joe looked at Travis, and he was teary eyed.

Not having anything better to say, Travis murmured, “Thank God. I mean, I’m glad he took it like that.”

Joe nodded. “Me too. The one taking it harder is Mary.”

“Mary? Why?”

“She’s happy I’m making an honest man of you, and that’s a quote. However, she’s a little upset, because getting married herself next month, she fears we’ll be stealing the spotlight from her.”

Travis smiled, he could see Mary’s tantrum. “Well, the domestic partnership isn’t as easy as getting married.”

“How so?”

Travis explained with a troubled expression. “Being a banker, I should have been familiar with all of this, but this is legislation I didn’t agree with until recently. I did some research, and the requirements are more than I thought, see?”

Joe read the information in front of him. “Yeah. I guess they want to be sure only committed couples sign this agreement. But we meet all the requirements. We’ve been living together for a few months now. You do have proof of address, right?”

Nodding, Travis asked him about the troublesome part. “Did you read the part about proof of joint financial responsibility?”

“Yep.”

“Do you understand how serious that is?”

“No, but I’m sure you will explain it.”

“New Jersey is one of the states where marriage is a very serious business. This domestic partnership law was written in a way that, without being a marriage, it still has the same legal consequences—in some cases, more. A normal marriage doesn’t require upfront disclosure of retirement pensions, or finances. So basically, we will be getting half of each other’s assets.”

“So what? I kind of knew that already. It’s fine with me.”

“I have so little to offer. I’m basically unemployed, even if I have some savings. You on the other hand—”

“Travis, do you remember what you said, when I told you, you could keep our bed?”

“Yes.”

“Well, all the money and properties in this world mean very little if I’m alone, like I was before meeting you.”

“I was the one who proposed to you. I don’t want it to look like I’m taking advantage of you. I want to add you to the deeds of my house. We can use that as proof of the joint financial requirement.”

Joe disagreed. “No, that would take a couple of weeks. I don’t want you to change your mind.”

“I won’t change my mind.”

Joe patted his head, saying, "I'll just add you to one of my checking accounts. That would do."

Travis grinned. "You make everything sound so simple. Hey, look here. The affidavit we're going to sign states that 'both persons have chosen to share each other's lives in a committed relationship of mutual caring'. Isn't that romantic?"

Joe laughed. "Only you could find any part of a law romantic. This is romantic for me. Here." He handed a rose bud to him, and Travis received it in awe.

"It's so beautiful. So delicate."

The baby rose had a light pinkish color; very unique. Joe shifted his eyes from the bud to Travis's face. "I was talking with Mom while she was taking care of the garden. When I saw this, I *had* to steal it." Joe's sigh gave away the longing he felt. "When I saw this tiny rose, I thought of you. It has the same color as some parts of your body."

"Oh." That was all Travis could utter. He instinctively closed his robe even more. "Joe, what I said last night... I would... I will do, but you have to give me more time."

Joe helped him to stand, bringing him close to his own body. "I'm only thinking of your first lesson. It won't take long."

"Why tonight? Aren't you tired?"

"Because I'm naughty."

"Ah." After all, he was going to use Joe's Oh and Ah vocabulary. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Travis, listen. I know you have many barriers, and I don't expect you to discard them overnight. But if we are going to succeed, you must be flexible. I need your complete trust and honesty. The phrase 'give yourself to me' literally means that."

Joe pulled him to the nearby couch, and sat him next to him, taking hold of one of Travis's arms with his hand, turning it over, so both could see the forearm.

"In order to experience pleasure, you need to learn how to feel. I'm usually very quick, and my touch is rough, so, if we want to wake your sensitivity, we

need to slow down, and rise from there. For me to know what you like or don't like, I need you to tell me. Don't adopt the cold, silent attitude, because I really need to know how you truly feel. It's part of the whole process."

"Like moaning and such?" Travis made a face.

"Well, you can just say it. You can use words if you want. As long as you express your feelings. I need to know if you're enjoying it, or if it's painful to you."

"Painful? I thought we were talking about pleasure here. Don't tell me you are really naughty."

"No. Wait, don't freak out. Oh my God. How can I explain this? Listen, we won't get there today. But, there will be a moment in our lovemaking, when it can be painful. I won't lie to you."

"Even if we use that thing you bought?"

"The lubricant will help, but still... yes, it will be very uncomfortable. But that is only at the beginning. Don't be scared, you must trust me. Maybe I said too much."

"No, I'm glad you're telling me. It'd be worse if I went into the whole thing without knowing."

"Good. Hey, I've got an idea. Let's have a score system depending of what you feel, a scale from one to ten. For example, more than seven is pleasure, two is discomfort but bearable, one is pain, which should disappear once you get to three, got it?"

"Sort of."

"Touching the skin of the other person should give that person pleasure, but the trick is that one becomes better at pleasing the other if one is able to feel pleasure oneself, while giving it."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand." Travis appeared uneasy.

"Let me show you."

Using the tip of his index finger, Joe slowly traced a caress on Travis's forearm, down to his wrist. "Close your eyes, please." Travis complied and Joe continued the caress a few more seconds, before he said, "Score it."

"A four."

“Okay. Now it’s your turn.” Joe offered his arm and Travis repeated the caress without problem.

“Score it,” he said.

Joe shook his head. “But you’re the one receiving it. Remember, this is not about me. I need to know how you feel, while giving me pleasure. You score it.”

“I need to try again... I didn’t know...” Travis admitted, now visibly restless.

“Fine, let’s repeat it, but with a twist. I’ll go first.”

Joe took Travis’s arm and raised it to his mouth, and did the same caress with the tip of his tongue. “Score it.”

His voice surprised Travis, who, still lost in the sensation of Joe’s tongue over his skin, answered, “That’s a five.”

“Now it’s my turn.” Joe offered his arm.

Travis hesitated. “I don’t have the same skills as you.”

“Well, you are learning, you need to practice, so please do it. And it doesn’t have to be exactly the same. You can create your own caresses.”

Travis tried, but ended up licking Joe’s arm with his whole tongue—sensual, and wet, but not very erotic.

Joe laughed. “That was a five, and I’m being generous.”

“I told you so,” Travis muttered.

Joe showed his tongue, and pointed to the tip. “This is what you’re going to use. For now, just the tip. Do it again, please.”

Travis closed his eyes, and began to caress Joe’s forearm with the tip of his tongue, slowly tracing the muscular structure of it, surprised by the firmness of the skin under his tongue and the fact he liked how Joe’s skin tasted.

“Score it,” Joe said.

This time Travis answered without thinking. “Seven.”

“Did you feel it?”

“What?”

“The difference between giving and receiving.”

“Yes.”

They continued the game for a while, and when Joe moved up from Travis's arm to his neck, the score rose too. At one point, when Travis was taking a turn at Joe's neck, Joe said something he didn't understand. Travis raised his head, with his tongue still in a licking position, and Joe caught it, caressing it with his own, sending a wave of sensations through his entire body. He withdrew and looked Travis in the eye.

“Score?”

“Ten.”

They were both smiling.

“You see, Travis? You can do it. Well, that will be all for now.”

Travis looked disappointed. “So this was the first lesson?”

Joe nodded, and turned around, heading for the bedroom door. Travis remained sitting on the couch, thinking—*well it wasn't that bad*. Before opening the door, Joe glanced back at him, and all of a sudden he retraced his steps.

“We can have the second lesson completed tonight.”

“Fine. What's next?”

“This time, I will only teach you and then I'll give you a break. You don't have to score it, or practice. Just enjoy, and try to remember, because later, I want you to try to repeat it. It will be your first test.”

When Joe pulled him off of the couch, Travis wasn't expecting it, but it didn't surprise him as much as Joe taking him in his arms, bridal style and carrying him to the bedroom.

“Wait! Aren't we supposed to sign those papers first?”

“For this we don't need any papers, trust me.”

Joe pushed him gently onto the bed, lying down next to him, and began to kiss his neck, alternating soft kisses with the light trace of the tip of his tongue.

Travis kept his eyes closed. He was drunk on all of these new feelings. It felt so good, so intoxicating—Joe's mouth and hands all over his body. All of a sudden, he didn't care anymore if it was embarrassing or not. If this was a sin, he was a willing sinner. His heart was pounding in his chest, his blood was

boiling, he was thirsty for Joe's lips, and hungry for experiencing their tongues tangled together. He sucked Joe's tongue, surprising him.

Chapter 15

Joe opened Travis's robe all the way down to his waist, admiring the defined muscles of his chest, perfect skin and the pinkish nipples. Joe was making an effort to be gentle. He didn't want to scare Travis after gaining so much. Tracing the outside of his areola with the tip of his tongue, he completed full circles, then licked around Travis's nipples, zeroing in on each tip, flicking his tongue back and forth, finishing up with a gentle bite.

Once Travis's robe was discarded Joe could see the half erection hidden by the underwear, and he couldn't wait any longer. He had to see him. In a fast move, he removed the piece of fabric and watched all of Travis's body. Yes, the rest of him was pinkish. His balls, tight and high due to the arousal and his uncut dick and the head leaking pre-cum made his mouth thirsty.

"You know what, Travis?" he said in a voice that was almost unintelligible. "We're jumping to lesson three."

"What?"

Travis barely had time to understand what he said. Even if he had, he could have never guess what lesson number three was. He watched through half-open eyes as Joe went down and pushed his foreskin back, then used his tongue to lick the moisture in there before taking his cock into his mouth.

He'd heard about what Joe was doing to him, but he'd never experienced it before. The curiosity was only surpassed by the pleasure. He felt Joe's hand caressing his backside as he continued to bob up and down, taking his cock nearly whole into his mouth to let it go out and then sucking it in again. At one point, Travis started lifting his hips and pushing forward. Joe's hand helped by holding his ass, and Travis found surprising the satisfaction he experienced at the touch. He never imagined that part of his body was so sensitive.

Then Joe touched his anus. Travis froze, alarmed, but let him continue, because Joe kept sucking him faster, while using the tip of one finger to gently caress the outside of his entrance. Joe's finger slid into him, and Travis moaned. Then the finger thrust in and out of him, and Travis couldn't take it any longer. As he came, he tried to push Joe, but Joe held on to Travis's hips until he drank him dry.

A few seconds later, Travis was still trembling, and trying to catch his breath from the most intense orgasm ever. Joe hugged him tenderly.

“Oh. Joe, there was a moment I thought I was going to die.”

“Indeed, the French call it ‘the little death’.”

“Now I understand why... yes, I understand. I’ve never thought it could be like this. Thanks, Joe, thank you so much.” Travis felt so tired, so sleepy. He closed his eyes for a second.

“Thank you? Don’t worry, those were lessons two and three. Tomorrow you’ll have your first test. I’ll be expecting you to show me what you learned.”

“Tomorrow?”

Travis opened his eyes. “What about you? You didn’t have too much satisfaction, that I know.”

“I had my mind on pleasing you. I can control myself quite well. Don’t worry, I’m fine. But you owe me, so Tomorrow you’ll pay me back. Maybe we’ll have lesson four then.”

Joe pecked him, and Travis’s whole body shivered, anticipating the pleasure of the next time. *Wait a minute. If that was lesson three, what in the world could be lesson four?*

Can I try, Joe?”

“Do you mean, lesson three?”

“Yep.” Travis nodded and licked his lips. Joe didn’t want to push him, but his erection was too painful to reason with and even if Travis probably had never done that with anybody, he wanted to be the first man Travis would taste, and, if it depended on him, the only one ever.

“Are you sure?”

Travis nodded and asked, “Isn’t it better if you remove all those clothes.”

“Don’t you want me to take a shower first?”

To his surprise, Travis inhaled and said, “No, I like how you smell.”

Never in his life had Joe felt shy under any man’s eyes, but while removing his clothes, he was conscious of his body like never before, and for a moment

the idea crossed his mind to run to the bathroom and take a delaying shower anyway. But Travis's hand pushing his underwear down erased all rational thoughts.

Travis placed himself between Joe's legs, and hesitated, but then, staring at Joe, mimicked step by step each caress Joe had given him before. He gagged when he tried to take him too deep.

"Slow down. This takes time. You don't need to go too deep, I'm enjoying it like that," Joe said, panting, while Travis tried again the up and down. Joe nudged him and whispered, "Travis, let go of me, I'm coming."

"Why? You're not done."

"I'm nearly there. You don't have to swallow." A memory of how much he wanted Travis to do that when they first met, almost pushed Joe over the limit. But one thing was fantasy, and another taking the risk of Travis refusing to repeat lesson three ever.

"But I want to. I mean, I'm not sure if I'll be able to do it as good as you, but can I try?"

"Sure." If he insisted. When Travis took him into his mouth again and performed a nearly perfect bobbing, Joe didn't reason anymore. He convulsed while holding Travis's head and coming down his throat.

Next Joe felt Travis lying down next to him. "How was it? Did you like it?"

Still heaving, Joe answered, "It was awesome! What about you? Don't you regret swallowing?"

Travis hesitated for a moment, and Joe held his breath. Then as if he had made up his mind, Travis looked him in the eyes and explained. "Now, I totally understand what you meant by feeling pleasure by pleasuring another. It tasted a little bitter, but I can handle it."

Joe breathed and hugged him. There was a good possibility that one day the pupil could surpass the teacher. Nothing wrong with that; he already loved the way Travis behaved when passion instead of fury ruled him.

Chapter 16

The next morning, they walked into the main house kitchen, holding hands. Mary was there, finishing her breakfast, and as soon as she saw them exclaimed, "Congratulations! But you know what? This is not fair. You're stealing my spotlight. My wedding's supposed to be the event of the year."

Travis muttered a thank you, and shyly busied himself serving coffee for both of them, while Joe laughed at her little girl expression. "You can keep your spotlight. We're not going to make any big party or official announcement. Mary, just between us, I think Travis got scared when he saw Matt kissing me."

When Travis stared at him, Joe winked so he realized it was a joke. *Will Travis ever catch on to my sense of humor?*

"And you?" Mary wasn't kidding; now he would have to explain himself. Cocky, Travis raised his brows behind his cup and sipped his coffee.

Joe thought if anybody deserved an acknowledgment of the truth, it was Mary. "You know I would do anything to keep him next to me. I've never thought I could love anyone that much. You have no idea, how patient I've been with him. So, don't worry. We're only going to sign and file an affidavit. In that room will only be Travis, the notary and me. The real wedding will be yours. About Mom—do you really think, she will be okay with us?"

"From what you've told me, she'll probably take it fine. Dad, thank God, accepted you like you are ages ago."

"Still, I feel a little awkward about it."

"Don't worry. You deserve to be happy. I'll do all I can to help you. I promise. Come on—let me show you something which will light up your day." She grimaced while dialing the combination to open the briefcase on the kitchen table. "Because Daniel is too busy, and his schedule never allows him to go to the jewelry store, they sent me these for him to choose from, and I thought you guys might want to pick yours too."

She opened the briefcase and turned it around. It was full of wedding rings, neatly arranged by models and sizes; all very exquisite and expensive.

"Mary, you really think about everything."

“Well, I can’t take credit for this. It was the jeweler’s idea. When you mentioned the getting legally bonded part, I remembered this. Come on, please choose.”

Travis was the first to talk. “It won’t be a ceremony. We’re only going to sign the affidavit. There won’t be a judge asking for rings.”

Joe looked at him, and held his hand. “Even though you were the one who proposed, I want to ask, would you wear a ring as a symbol of our union?” Travis was visibly touched, and could only nod. Joe pushed him gently toward the briefcase. “Please choose for the two of us.”

Travis chose two platinum rings with an interlaced fine line of gold, and Joe said, with a tender voice, “Well, since we are not having a ceremony, I suggest we do our own. Let’s exchange rings, here, in front of the person who has done more than anyone else for our happiness. Thank you, Mary.”

It was a very simple rite; Joe silently put the ring on Travis’s finger, and Travis did the same with Joe’s ring. Next, he angled his mouth until it met Joe’s, kissing him with fervor. Slowly, using both hands, Travis followed a path from the back of Joe’s neck, to his head, caressing his hair, softly massaging his scalp, while kissing him. It was an amazingly sensual touch, which had the effect of moving Joe’s innermost feelings. With the same calm, Travis initiated the kiss, he ended it.

Silent tears were dripping from Mary’s face. She smiled and put her hands together like a child.

“I’m so happy for you two. You’re all set. Mom is putting together a little party, and I just made a reservation for a honeymoon on the Poconos.”

Travis was worried. “The Poconos? That’s too far. And I can’t go. What about the children? We’ve never been apart.”

“That’s covered too,” Mary said. “Mom and I will take care of them over the weekend.”

Travis awaited help from Joe, who seemed to like the idea of going away. Travis was desperate to find a good excuse. All of a sudden, he said, “Joe, please... if lesson number four is about what I think it is, I prefer being in our bed.”

For the first time in her life, Mary saw how her brother blushed up to his ears. He glared at Travis and then turned to his sister.

“Thanks, Mary, but we will be staying at home. Please cancel those reservations. Maybe in the future.” He shrugged.

Before Mary could inquire about lesson number four, Travis, who was blushing too, got Joe out of the door.

“Let’s go. I found a notary who will do the signing for us this afternoon, and we still have to go to your bank.”

Joe allowed him to pull him out of the kitchen and called back, “See you later little sister. Thanks for everything.”

Joe opened the door of the car for Travis, and helped him inside. Travis was about to say something, but realizing there were a few people looking at them, he simply sat down. When Joe got behind the wheel, Travis said calmly, but firmly, “Stop treating me like I’m your girl. I’m a man.”

Joe was surprised. “What are you saying?”

“Listen, Joe. I don’t know much about this kind of relationship, but I heard there is somebody who is supposed to be the feminine partner, right?”

Joe thought for a moment. “Well, I don’t have any gay couples friends in here. But my friends in New York... yeah. Now that you mention it, there is some kind of pattern. In our case—”

“It won’t be me.”

“Well, Travis, do I look feminine to you? I don’t look the part.”

“I guess not. In that case, it will be like you told me—you are a man who doesn’t want to be a woman, and I think and feel the same. We will be a two-man couple.”

Joe laughed like it was the funniest thing ever. “And I thought the hard part was getting you into my bed. Fine, you are my man.”

“No more opening doors for me, or holding my hand like I’m going to fall if you don’t support me.”

“Agreed. Anything else?”

Travis, changed his tone to a more affectionate one. “Promise you will always be there for me.”

Joe looked straight into those blue eyes. “I promise. As long as I live, you’ll always have someone to trust. I will take you on a journey of unlimited passion. We will be two souls, merged into one, for all eternity.”

“Oh.” Before he started the monosyllabic torrent of words, Travis forced himself to say, “That’s romantic.”

Chapter 17

Later that day, Travis had stopped at the bank to simply hand over his resignation letter. He didn't care anymore what anyone over there thought of him. The envious manager who gossiped about him would probably be promoted to his former position. So be it. He had more important things to do.

Like going to the town hall, signing and filing an affidavit of domestic partnership with Joe. It was more like registering a business than a marriage, but Travis felt very glad of having a legal bond to Joe.

Who seemed pleased too.

"I'm starving, I can't wait to get home. Maybe we should have stopped to get something before."

Travis disagreed. "No, we're almost there, and I want to see the kids. I'm hungry too."

Joe kept turning the wheel with one hand, while with the other one he held Travis's. "Fine. I just can't believe it's finally over. What a long day. There was a moment I thought we weren't going to make it in time."

"But we did it." Travis smiled, holding in his free hand a folder which contained, among other things, their certificate of domestic partnership.

"Oh. Nooo. I thought it was a small party." Joe stopped in front of the portal on the road, which led to their home. There were so many cars parked, he barely found space for his. "We're going to have to walk from here."

Travis followed him, a little concerned. Joe wasn't happy, but when he saw Mary walking toward them, that's when he became really worried.

"Hi, guys, I was waiting for you two. Why did it take you so long?"

"I'll tell you later. Right now I'm really hungry. What's all this?"

Mary rolled her eyes. "The whole family is here."

"What? I thought only the closest ones were coming."

"I'm sorry, Joe, but everybody is so happy for you. At least the ones from the Tri-state area are here."

"Is there a way we can get in without being seen?"

Mary walked in front of them with her childish disposition. “That’s why I’m here. The kitchen is clear—they’re all on the deck.”

“The kitchen. Just the place I need.”

They went inside, and Joe grabbed the first food he saw, which happened to be a piece of pizza. Travis observed him eating.

“You really like pizza.”

Joe smiled, and grabbed his third piece. “Come on, help yourself. I better get the real thing now, just in case I can’t get any pizza later.”

Mary didn’t know what they were talking about, so she said, “Don’t worry. There’s more pizza than you can eat. With so little time, Mom and I decided to order your favorite food, and Travis’s favorite dessert, so there’s all kinds of pizza toppings and all varieties of cheesecake.”

Joe made her a sign, which she didn’t understand. “I need something to drink, please.”

She smiled and served him some ice tea. “This one is in Travis’s honor too.”

“Thanks.” Joe drank while Travis recalled the first time he had watched him drinking ice tea. Yes, he had truly changed, there was no doubt about it. As if Joe could read his thoughts, he gave him one of those naughty smiles of his, and Travis was happy to return it.

Joe saw as Travis stood, looking for a glass for himself. Mary followed him, making an effort to raise herself to his height. She whispered something in his ear. Joe shrugged, and kept eating, until he noticed that Mary and Travis were drinking from a separate container she had taken from the fridge. He noticed Travis’s new expression when he drank, but assumed it was another kind of ice tea. Joe stood and glared at the backyard, beyond the deck to all the people. “Travis, don’t worry, my family is pretty cool. Today is a very special day, because most of those folks stood by me back in the day, when Mom didn’t accept the fact I was gay. Thank God she changed her mind.”

“Yes, Mary told me about it.”

Joe continued watching the group, checking who was there. A tall, skinny person caught his attention. His relaxed expression changed. “Mary. Come over here.”

“What’s wrong?” She joined him by the window.

“What is Matt doing here?”

“Matt? Who invited Matt?” Travis stopped eating, and drank from his glass, suddenly anxious.

“Mom did.”

“Mom? Who is she? My mother, or my worst enemy?” Joe asked, abandoning his last piece of pizza.

“Please calm down. I was with her when she invited him. Surprisingly, he declined. Anyway, Mom insisted that he should come, because according to her, seeing you and Travis together would bring closure to both of you, but especially to him. Besides, he came with someone.”

“Closure? I’m not so sure. The last time was horrible.”

Travis was starting to get really worried and Mary noticed.

“Well, Travis, don’t worry. Joe and I won’t leave you alone with him.”

Travis smiled and showed his empty glass. “Can I have another, please?” Mary rushed to the fridge and Joe’s eyes narrowed.

“Can I have some of that, please?”

Mary froze, and put the container back. “I’ll get you something better.”

“No, Mary, I want the same thing you’re drinking.” Mary lowered her sight, while Joe walked over and stopped next to her. “What is it? What are you feeding Travis?”

She finally looked him in the eyes. Her expression was like a little girl caught feeding the pet at the wrong time.

“I just wanted to help.”

“I’m waiting, what is it? Fine, let me see for myself.”

Joe took the glass from Travis’s hand, took a sip, then put it back on the table, yelling, “Russmex! You’re feeding him Russmex? Are you out of your mind? He’s probably never even had a beer.”

Travis intervened. “It’s fine. I think she is correct. I need this.”

Joe looked at him, even more upset. “Really, do you know what you’ve been drinking?”

Travis shook his head. "I trust Mary. It's just a cocktail, she said... she said..."

Joe wasn't listening. "It is a cocktail. She invented it many years ago—ten years ago, to be exact. The main ingredients are tequila and vodka, mixed with any sweet drink. Do you have any idea what that can do to you?"

"I'm sorry, Joe," Mary said. "I'm really sorry, I was thinking about tonight... in my case it helped a lot."

Joe was frantic remembering how much it helped her. "Yes, how can I forget? I was the one looking for you guys all night, and part of the next day. Motel after motel."

Travis didn't know what they were talking about, but said, "Joe, please calm down. You're getting mad about everything today."

"I'm upset for two reasons. One, if you keep drinking that, you will be useless to me tonight. And two, this lady just brought back an incident I'd prefer to forget."

Travis looked at Mary wondering. She sat next to him. "Travis, do you remember what I told you, about drinking this, so your first time won't hurt?"

Travis nodded. Joe couldn't believe it. She was going to tell him all about it.

"Mary stop being so concerned about Travis's well-being, please."

She ignored him and kept talking. "When I was eighteen, on my prom night, I prepared the same cocktail for Daniel and me. We did it for the first time. It worked. I didn't feel any pain. But Joe..."

Joe couldn't take it anymore. "I spent the whole night looking for you two, thinking you ran away together or something. And guess what? It was because of the Russmex. They both passed out. I didn't find them until the next day—almost noon. It was the worst experience I've lived."

Mary shrugged. "Nothing happened to us. We just fell asleep. And you beat the hell out of Daniel."

"He deserved it, that punk. I still feel like kicking him when I remember." Joe spoke to Travis now. "The only thing that saved him, was that she admitted to being the one who seduced him."

"What? How old was Daniel?"

“Nineteen,” Mary said. “But he was so slow, I had to take matters into my own hands.” As Mary answered, she winked at Travis.

“And you guys have been together ever since. How romantic,” Travis said with his most tender voice. Joe rolled his eyes.

“She keeps dodging the marriage, almost in the same way she had avoided finishing college.”

“Not anymore. I’ll be his wife next month. It’s about time I made him an honorable man. Travis, this really works. It will relax you. And you know what, Joe? It was one of the best nights of my life.”

As she finished saying the last sentence, she ran out of the kitchen. Joe raced after her, and watched her join their family. He came back to sit next to Travis.

“I’d prefer if you don’t drink it. I’ll do my best to make it good for you. Besides, I’m not drinking anything, and it will be my first time too.”

Travis glared at him like he had never seen him before. He didn’t understand. Joe moved the chair closer.

“Do you remember, what I told you, about making our union unique? I said, I’ll do something with you I haven’t done, with anybody else.”

Travis nodded. Joe held his hand, seeking his eyes.

“What you said to me today made my decision final. Since you insist on being the man, I will give you the opportunity to prove yourself.”

Travis was overwhelmed. He rescued his hand to indicated between the two of them. “Do you mean... do you want me to...”

Joe helped him, finishing the sentence for him. “Like you would say, I will let you put your thing inside of me. It is the only unique memory I can give you, that I’ve never done with anyone else.”

Travis moved his head in denial. “I don’t know if I can. Indeed, I don’t think I can, Joe.”

Joe stood. “You’d better take this chance, because I will allow you to go first. But I will still put mine inside of you.”

“You said I would be the man.” Travis stood, too.

“And you said this is a two-man couple. So, this is the deal. I will give myself to you first, not only because I want you to know how much you mean

to me, but because in that way, you will understand better when your turn comes to give yourself to me.”

“What about if we just do lesson number three for a while? I think I can learn to do that well.”

Joe smiled like a real pervert. Tracing Travis's face slowly, he pulled him close, speaking next to his lips. “Sure, you will have plenty of time to practice lesson number three, all you want. But, there is something I forgot to tell you. Lesson number three isn't enough for me. Last night I was sexually starving, but normally, it would take you hours to get me off with it. It is a great appetizer, but for me to be totally satisfied, only one thing will do, and that is lesson number four... mine inside of you.”

Chapter 18

Travis was speechless, and Joe suspected that he'd never been so grateful to see Mary. She came to take them to meet the guests. During the next hour, they went from group to group, meeting everyone; Joe simply introduced him as Travis. But everybody knew that he was his partner—even Nadine was happy for them.

The children got their own version of the events. When they overheard Mary speaking with Christine about the legal signing Travis and Joe were doing, Richard and Edward were happy, thinking their dad just adopted Joe. Travis couldn't tell them otherwise. One day he would explain everything to them. But not today.

A few times, Joe and Matt looked at each other from a distance. Matt stood by the back of the house, like he didn't want to see anymore. Christine suggested Travis and Joe go and greet him, as they did with everyone else.

"No, Mom," Joe said. "It's too much to ask."

Travis disagreed. He had been thinking about it, and it was better to put an end to this uncomfortable situation. "Let's do it, Joe. Sooner or later, we'll have to face him."

Joe followed, a little reluctantly, to the part of the garden where Matt stood with the guy he'd brought with him—someone Joe knew was an ex-boyfriend. Matt really had issues leaving the past behind.

A few steps before getting to them, Travis turned back and said, meeting Joe's eyes, "This time I'll do the talking. If he is civil, I'm willing to forget his past behavior, but if he tries to hurt us in any way, I'll have no mercy."

There was Travis, the warrior, once again in front of him.

"I would prefer to avoid him, but since it can't be helped..." Joe started to say.

Travis got closer saying with dark eyes, "I need your permission to speak in your name."

Joe laughed. "What? Do I have to sign a power of attorney?"

"No, but I'm asking your permission, because I might say things which will damage any image Matt has of you. After this he might hate you."

Joe thought for a moment and shrugged. "Please do whatever it takes to get him out of our lives. I stopped caring what he thought of me a long time ago."

After all that, the first one to speak was Joe. He held Travis by his side in a very possessive manner. "I guess we don't need any introductions. I just want to thank you for attending our little celebration."

Alfonso, Matt's boyfriend, seemed honest when he congratulated them with a friendly smile, and said, "I'm really glad for you two. This is wonderful, you have such a nice family, Joe."

"Thanks, Alfonso, I hope you enjoy your stay here."

Matt was watching them in silence. Joe glared at his eyes for a moment, and saw an emotion he'd never seen before; it was sorrow. Matt eyes were painfully examining the wedding bands on both of their hands. He finally spoke.

"Congratulations, Joe. Your dream finally came true." The smile didn't reach his eyes. He addressed Travis with an ironic tone. "And you, pretty boy, congratulations too. Can I have a private word with you?"

"No, you can't," Joe informed him. "Whatever you're going to say to him, it must be in front of me."

Matt ignored Joe, and clarified to Alfonso, with a "poor me" expression, "We will be only a few feet away, and the one who punches first and asks questions later, it's him."

Joe could sense the tautness embracing Travis, who was getting madder by the second. "Let's go then, if you want to speak in private. It's fine, Joe, I can handle it."

He walked to a corner of the garden; Matt followed him, and they stood in front of each other, like duelists. From a distance, Joe and Alfonso observed them carefully. They couldn't hear what was being said, though. Watching them together, Joe could see how different they really were; Travis was very masculine in his way of walking and standing, while Matt was as feminine as any girl. Despite the fact that he was wearing male clothes, he managed to look delicate, graceful, almost fragile, like a ballerina.

"Fine, go ahead. I'm waiting." Travis was expecting the first punch.

"I want you to remember that you are just a cheap substitute of me. If he is with you, it's because he wants to hurt me."

Travis could hardly believe it. He was asking for it, and he was going to get it. Travis felt Mary's cocktail having an effect on him. All of a sudden, he could lower himself to Matt's level, without any hesitation.

"Really? I'm sorry, but you're wrong. If Joe is with me, it's because he loves me."

"Love? Don't be naïve. Joe thinks from his waist downwards."

Travis grimaced at the expression. "We agree about that. Still, what we have is very different from what you guys ever had."

"Don't forget I was his first lover. And everything he ever does—"

"Wait a minute. The lovemaking between Joe and me is very different. And yes, you might have been his first lover. However, in one way or another, this is an honor we both share."

Matt's eyes were dark as the night. He moved closer to Travis. "What do you mean?"

Travis responded with a devilish grin. "In this couple, I'm the man, Matt. I guess you know what I mean."

Matt shook his head in disbelief. "What do you mean, you're the man? Joe would never allow you to do that. You're lying."

Matt turned around, looking at Joe, like he needed to see him to verify he was still the man he once knew.

Travis stood behind Matt, speaking with a low voice, predatory and sensual. "There is no tactful way to say this. If you have any doubts, I'll translate it for you. I'm the one who is fucking his ass."

Matt held his breath, like someone who has been injured. However, Travis didn't stop there, he got close enough to him that Matt could feel his body, sense his masculinity.

"Matt, I have enough experience to know that I was his first. I have no doubts that I was the one who took his virginity from him."

From a distance, Joe witnessed Matt's painful expression. Joe frowned, looking back at him. *What was going on? Matt, looked really upset.*

For a moment, it looked like Travis thrust a dagger into his back, and was twisting it inside the wound. Joe felt he had to intervene.

“I’ll be right back, Alfonso. Please wait here.”

“But if Matt—”

“Please wait here. I’ll bring him back to you.”

Joe got to them, and Travis welcomed him with a grin.

“Joe, can you please tell Matt who is the man in our couple? He doesn’t believe me.”

Joe saw Matt’s perplexed expression, and Travis’s determined one. “Matt, this is none of your business, but Travis is right. He is my man.”

Matt staggered back, still in shock. “How could you, Joe? How can you change this much?”

Joe answered with an honesty that Matt could not question. “Because I love him, Matt. I really do. Let’s go. Alfonso is waiting for you.”

He held Matt by the arm, helping him walk over to where Alfonso was standing. Travis followed them silently.

Alfonso rushed to meet him. “Are you okay, Matt?”

Matt looked at him, answering with a drama queen voice, “No, I think the champagne went to my head. Please get me out of here.”

Joe literally delivered him into Alfonso’s arms, and then watched them leave, at the same time thinking how ironic life could be. A few years ago he would have never imagined himself putting Matt into another man’s arms.

Travis hugged Joe. “Do you still have feelings for him? Don’t look at me like I’m crazy, I saw the pain in your eyes.”

Joe hugged him back. “For many years I wished this day to come, when I could see him suffering for me, because he would always act like nothing happened. Even when I was in deep pain because of his betrayal, he would dismiss my feelings, thinking sex would make me forget. I was so sure he was unable to feel anything other than lust. Today, I discovered he can suffer like us. I didn’t enjoy it though. Maybe because he means nothing to me. What you saw in my eyes, it’s pity. I feel sorry for him. You crushed his ego.”

“Maybe I exceeded myself. But he really deserved it.”

“I’m not sure what you told him, but whatever it was, probably it is true, right?”

Travis faced him and smiled. “No, not yet. But it will become true before the night is over. And now, I need another Russmex.”

Chapter 19

Travis woke up alone in the bed. When he tried to sit, the heavy burden inside his head made him rest again. He slowly opened his eyes. *What happened? Joe? Where is Joe?*

He looked around the room. The bathroom door was half open and he could see Joe wasn't there. The room was semi-dark; only the dancing lights of the fireplace provide some illumination.

“Ay. Oh.”

He tried to stand, but his head hurt so much. In that moment, he saw a movement in the corner of the room, next to the windows. He almost jumped at the tall dark figure. It took some seconds for him to realize it was Joe. They looked at each other for a while, Travis studying his almost eerie appearance. Joe was wearing some kind of black robe, and with the light of the moon at his back, and the light of the fireplace, he seemed like a handsome demon.

Walking toward the bed with a slow motion, without saying a word, it would have appeared to an onlooker like a devil was visiting an angel. Joe wasn't smiling, and his face was as cool as Travis had ever seen him before.

Oh. He is upset, Travis thought, hiding between the sheets. Joe didn't talk until he sat on the bed. Travis was sure he was controlling himself.

“So you have finally awoken.”

“What... what happened?”

Joe raised an eyebrow, still without smiling. “Have you forgotten?”

Travis closed his eyes. He remembered feeling dizzy at some point in the middle of the party, and almost falling, Joe holding him, and after that, he couldn't remember... wait, the shower, yes he remembered being in the shower with Joe. He looked at his naked body under the sheets.

“What happened between us, Joe... please tell me?”

Joe smiled; it was a diabolical one. “Do you really want to know?”

Travis thought for a moment. Joe was satisfied. He was really enjoying torturing him with the countless possibilities of what might had happened.

“Please, tell me. I'm not some stranger. I'm your... your lover?”

This time Joe couldn't play with him anymore, he laughed at Travis naïveté.

"You silly. You got drunk. I told you not to drink the damn Russmex. Next time, you'd better listen."

"Yes, I'm so sorry. I just remember you holding me, and the shower. What were we doing in there together?"

Joe grinned again. "What do you think?"

"Please stop teasing me."

"All right. I was going to save you the humiliation, but I'll tell you, so the next time you want to drink, you'll think twice. I hardly had time to take you to the bathroom before you vomited."

"Oh. I'm so sorry."

"I had to get you under the shower to clean you up. I always imagined us sharing a shower for another reason. Now, go back to sleep."

"I'm not sleepy anymore. What about you? Did you get any sleep?"

"Yes. I woke up about an hour ago. It's nearly four in the morning. Try to rest some more."

Joe tried to walk away, and Travis grabbed his hand. Joe gently freed it.

"What is it? Are you still upset? I will never drink again. I promise. Please, lie here with me."

Joe walked away, simply saying, "I can't, Travis. Here, drink this. It will help with your headache, and don't deny it, I can see it in your eyes. I brought some fruit, thinking you couldn't take the medicine with an empty stomach."

He walked around the bed, getting a glass of water and two pills. When Travis went to grab the pills, he hesitated, signaled to him to wait, went back to the table and brought a mandarin, and began to peel it. Travis observed, fascinated by how agile his hands were peeling the fruit. Joe placed a piece in his mouth and then looked away when he saw Travis opening his lips to accept the fruit. With the second piece, Travis grabbed Joe's fingers between his lips, licking them sensually. Joe pulled his hand away and gave him back the pills. Travis swallowed them, pulling a face like a little kid.

"Don't you want to be with me anymore?"

"It isn't that. I'd prefer if you recover first."

“I’m totally recovered.”

Joe walked to the windows and stayed there. Travis followed him, badly wrapping a sheet around himself. He stood behind Joe, who was looking at the darkness outside.

“Joe, please...”

“Go back to the bed.”

“Is it because of him? Are you thinking about Matt? Do you regret...”

Joe turned around as fast as he could and grabbed Travis’s hand, pulling him with so much force that Travis lost his breath when he impacted against his body. Joe’s eyes were as flaming as the fire next to them.

“I was trying to be a gentleman with you. Do you remember when I said I’m quick and rough? Well, that is how I am. This is the last time you doubt what I feel for you. This is the last damn time you mention him.”

He was holding Travis with force, but Travis didn’t let him know that his grip hurt. He caressed his hair, with his free hand. “I’m sorry, Joe. It won’t happen again.”

“Yes, I’m sure it won’t. After today you won’t have any more doubts.”

He lowered his head and claimed Travis’s mouth like it belonged to him. The kiss was rude, but when Travis opened his mouth and used his tongue to find Joe’s, the kiss became more tender, with a passion neither of them anticipated.

Joe relaxed his grip, pushing his body against Travis. The sheet fell from Travis’s naked body, showing the beauty of his shape and his skin, which looked golden, lit by the fire. Joe moved his hips forward and at the same time, he raised Travis to the level of their crotches, moving his hands down to Travis’s buttocks with a simple movement so he could hold him even closer. Travis helped, opening his legs and embracing Joe’s hips with them. They continued to kiss for a while, until Travis realized they were in the bed. He’d lost track of time; maybe the Russmex was still in his system.

“Now it’s my turn, Joe,” Travis said, gently pushing Joe back onto the bed. He pulled the robe Joe was wearing to one side and placed himself on top of him. Joe opened his legs to accommodate him. Travis could feel his own hard-on, and Joe’s erection, but he could not get himself to watch. He tried to gain time, concentrating on Joe’s neck. Closing his eyes, he began to caress his chest

with his hands, finding his nipples. Unlike his own, Joe's were light brown, and a little bigger. It was the first time he dared to look so closely at them. He blushed remembering the time they looked to see if they had holes.

Joe didn't keep his hands idle. He was slowly caressing Travis's whole back, from the nape of his neck right down to his buttocks, keeping his hands there a little longer, cupping each side with both hands, and pulling him closer. To Joe's delight, Travis began to moan. Joe whispered in his ear, while kissing his neck, "I want you so much Travis... you have no idea how much."

"Yes, I do... believe it or not. I do. I'm feeling a longing inside of me, which I don't know how to calm. The only thing clear is... I need your body. I need you, Joe."

Travis kissed Joe's chest, licking his nipples, sucking them. He paused, knowing what was next, but still unsure if he could. Another little touch of Joe's hands on his buttocks made him move forward. With a torturingly slow motion, Travis lowered himself until he met Joe's crotch. He gasped when he saw Joe's erect member. He had seen it before, even tasted it, but knowing that he was supposed to take it inside him, that was a different issue.

He was kind of fascinated and scared. It was bigger and longer than he recalled. Travis remembered what Joe did during lesson three, and opened his mouth, embracing his shaft. He looked up to see Joe's reaction; at first, he simply looked back at him with affection, but soon that look changed to lust. When Travis began moving his head up and down, Joe began to moan, with tiny tremors shaking his body.

At one point, Joe exclaimed, "Be careful with your teeth."

Travis was busy, but heard him and pulled his mouth away. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine, you learn pretty fast. Just a little more... Let me show you again..."

Joe sat and lowered his head, until he had Travis's member inside his mouth, and began to move his head with that expert motion Travis remembered so well. When Travis's moaning was almost climactic, Joe withdrew, sitting in front of him. Travis was disappointed.

"Why did you stop?"

"Time for lesson number four."

Joe rolled over and opened the side table drawer, pulling the lubricant out of its box. Travis was trembling; he wanted to run away, but with much effort, he held himself back.

“Like we agreed, you go first.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

Joe glared at him. “You will do fine. Just in case, I’ll be ready too. Come on, let me put this on you.”

The expression in Joe’s eyes was a clear warning—that he would take control of the situation if Travis couldn’t handle it.

Travis observed, fascinated by how Joe lowered his hand, applying the lube over his member, all around the head, after pulling back the foreskin, and after that, crosswise along the length. For Travis, every touch was a delight, and when their eyes met, he experienced shudders all the way to his innermost being.

“Give me the hand you use best,” Joe said.

Travis offered him his right hand. Joe checked and picked three fingers, applying lubricant to them too. Travis didn’t want to ask, but Joe saw his expression.

“We will try with the fingers first.”

“Ah.”

Joe applied the lubricant to himself in the same way, finally looking at Travis. “Please open your legs.”

“But you said that I—”

“You are still going first. I just want to apply some of this down there.”

Travis obeyed, feeling Joe’s expert hand applying the cold jelly substance around his anus, and when he felt Joe was going further he asked, “Are you sure of me going first?”

Joe nodded. “Copy me. Please apply some of this to my asshole.”

Travis was going to take the tube from his hand, but when he grabbed it, it just slipped, and without thinking Travis threw himself after it. Joe barely had time to grab him before he hit the floor.

“Forget it, we have enough all over. Don’t move. I will pull you back.”

While bringing him back to the bed, Joe observed the position Travis was in, with his back to him, and upside down. He could see his buttocks and the shadow to his entrance.

Joe finished returning him to the bed and tried to keep his tone neutral, but when he looked back at Travis's spread buttocks, and the tight entrance, he really needed it all in his control. He caressed the border first with a circular motion, moaning when he felt Travis doing the same thing to him, then he slowly put one of his fingers inside of him, feeling Travis hesitate.

"I'm waiting, it's fine."

When he did, Joe felt his whole body shudder with pleasure. He continued with the next two fingers, moving his hand to help the fingers open the path. He could hear the sounds of Travis's groaning, but he knew they couldn't stop now. He paused and pulled his fingers out slowly. Travis did the same.

"Well, this is it, Travis. Ready?"

"Ready."

"What are you waiting for? I can't feel anything."

Joe felt Travis moving his hips, but not penetration.

"Travis, what is it?"

"It doesn't stay put... I can't control it. It's too tight."

"Damn it. Hold it with your hand, and put it inside of me."

When Travis realized that he could do that, Joe almost regretted the advice. He was expecting some soreness, but it took him by surprise. The pain was very real. Joe bit his lower lip and kept going.

"Go ahead, Travis. Move."

In seconds, Joe recalled all those times he was the one doing the penetration. He had no idea it could be that way. Travis's movement increased, and the pain became aching pleasure. Joe started pulling his cock and matching Travis's rhythm, thinking that this time it was more for him, that there were other times when he could enjoy bottoming.

"Joe, I don't know how long I'll be able to hold it."

"Don't. I won't. Give me a moment and I'll get there, then you follow."

He moved his hand faster and in seconds he was coming all over himself. Travis followed shortly after. They embraced and fell into each other's arms.

About half an hour later, Travis said, "It was great, Joe. Thanks."

"No problem. For you, any time."

"I guess now it's your turn, right?" Travis's voice gave away how concerned he was.

"It's fine. When you feel like it, let me know." After experiencing how painful it could be, Joe preferred to wait until Travis craved it too.

"Now." It was an unexpected reply.

"What did you say?" Joe sat up.

"I feel like it now?" Travis sounded more secure.

Joe almost didn't hear him. Travis got on his knees and whispered in his ear, "Let's do it, now."

Maybe it was better to do it now. It would take some time for them to get used to it anyway. Joe turned him over and kissed him, slowly, deeply and slid his fingers into him, continuing kissing him. Then when he thought that Travis was ready to take him, he warned him, "Here we go—your turn."

Joe took his cock and put the head to Travis's entrance, and with a deep breath, he thrust ahead.

Travis shouted, "It hurts, pull it out..."

Joe tried to calm him down with his words. "Remember the scoring system? More than seven is pleasure, less is discomfort, but tolerable, one is pain, which should disappear once you get to seven or eight."

"Joe. Let's take a break please, I can't... this is overwhelming. I need a break."

"No. And don't dare to pull away now. If you do, when we try to get it in again, the pain will be more. Once it's inside, you hold it there. Just keep thrusting. Can you grab my hand? That's better... now we have to move."

"Move? No way."

"I'll move for the two of us. Your job is to keep it inside, not matter how I move, and to feel pleasure." Joe slowly increased the motion, and said, "Give me your score."

Travis was heavy breathing. "One. It's still one."

“Try to think of the pleasure in front of you. Forget the pain, don't tell me it doesn't feel good. Seek pleasure.”

The pleasure Travis thought of was when he had been inside Joe. He allowed himself to savor the memory of what Joe's body had felt like. It had been too much pressure at first, a sensation like being sucked in. He'd felt his member too tired, almost numb, but when Joe had begun to move, and he tried to keep his pace, he understood why Joe liked this more. It was way better than his mouth.

And now, that Travis was the one filled, the sensation was like being stuffed. Soon, the pain became pressure and when Joe kept moving, he found there was pleasure in it too.

“Travis, where are you?”

“Seven,” he answered without thinking, but yes, he was enjoying this.

Joe heard a deep moan and all of a sudden, Travis began to chant, “One... one... one...”

He got concerned and decided to pull out; he didn't want to hurt him.

“Travis, it can't be. How can you go back from seven to one again? One is pain.”

“One... one... one... hundreddd. Joe... Joe, I love you... Joe!”

By the time he said those words, Joe had felt Travis shivering deep inside. He knew what that meant, so he rushed his own climax. Soon he was screaming Travis's name. It was the most complete pleasure of all time, something he had never expected.

When they both stop moving, Travis said, “Did you feel that? It was a one hundred.”

Joe moved, bringing him to his chest. “No, Travis for me it was a one thousand.”

“Did you hear me saying your name? It's true, you were right. I felt like saying your name. So that was what you wanted so much. Now I understand.”

“Yeah. But next time I want to see your face.”

“And I thought you were more interested in my buttocks.”

“Travis. You are becoming a pervert. I want to be able to kiss you while we make love.”

“Me too.”

They kissed, this time tenderly.

“When can we repeat?” Travis asked.

“Are you kidding me? I guess, you aren't... Please. Give me some time. I'm dead.”

“I want to feel it again.”

“Wow. Travis, you really are becoming horny.”

“Do you think so?”

“I never knew somebody so happy to be like that.”

“It's because I'm yours, and you're mine.”

Chapter 20

One year later, on the evening of their first anniversary.

The two couples were sat in front of each other. Mary had her little feet on top of Daniel's lap; he was giving her a massage. Joe and Travis were sharing the opposite couch.

Mary tried to sit up from her resting position. "This pregnancy business is harder than I thought." After a few attempts and her husband's help, she succeeded in sitting up straight. "Happy anniversary, guys. I'm so happy to see you two together. You see, Joe? I have a future as a matchmaker."

Joe grinned at her with fun. "The only future I can see for you right now is in a delivery room. You certainly look like a balloon, little sister."

Travis pushed Joe gently with his elbow. "Stop bothering her. She looks so beautiful." He observed her with real affection.

"And you stop saying how beautiful she looks. She is my wife now," Daniel grumbled. He would never stop being extremely possessive when it came to Mary. Travis stood and pulled Joe to his feet.

"Whatever you say, Daniel. She's still beautiful to me—married, pregnant—I don't care."

"Thanks, darling." Mary blew him a kiss.

Travis returned the kiss, and hurried Joe along. "Let's go, Joe."

"Where's the fire? Take it easy. I'm coming," Joe said while standing up.

"I'm craving pizza," was all Travis had to say.

Mary was surprised. "But we just had dinner."

"It doesn't matter, I want some pizza tonight." Joe got to his side, and together they began to walk toward their house.

"Hey, you guys. The exit is the other way. Are you going to buy that pizza or not? If you do, please bring me some ice cream."

Travis and Joe said simultaneously, "We're not going out."

Once in their room Joe finished the comment, "However, we're still having pizza."

He kissed Travis, who didn't hold anything back. Later—much later—lying down and embracing each other on their bed, Joe was smiling while remembering something.

“May I know what you are thinking?” Travis asked.

“Wow. You sound like Daniel. I was thinking about you. The day we met...”

“Oh, no. Please don't. I feel so ashamed, I was such a dork back then. I guess you hated me.”

“No, for me, it was love at first attack. When I held you in my arms that first day, all I could dream was of holding you like I'm doing now. And you, Travis, when did you realize you had feelings for me... Travis? I'm talking to you.”

Travis hid his face in Joe's chest. Joe could feel how hot he was and lifted his head, holding his chin, so Travis could see him, face-to-face.

“Why are you blushing. What is it? I'm just curious to know when you first felt I could be someone important in your life.”

“When I found you in the bathroom, that morning. Do you remember? I went back to the bed, but I could still hear you. I got a hard-on. It was so confusing for me. All I knew was that I liked what I saw, and the craving I was feeling only you could satisfy. I'm sorry, if instead of being honest, I got mad with you, and forbid you from saying my name.”

Joe held him much closer to his heart. “No problem. And you were the one who didn't want to hear me yell. Now I have to cover your mouth, so you don't wake up everybody else.”

“Look! The dawn. Oh, Joe, we did it again. We spent the whole night making love.” Travis pointed to the sunrise showing up in the windows.

“Don't worry, it's Sunday. But, it's your fault. I told you we should flip a coin instead of debating who should be on top.”

“Actually, it's simple. The one on top should be me. Let me show you why. My skills to improvise and my creativity are so great, I'll give you a full demonstration. It's my turn now.”

“Fine with me, Travis, as long as I get my turn to prove why my experience qualifies me to be on top. I deserve a chance to give a full demonstration too...”

The sun was high in the sky, and they were still proving to each other who was more suited to be in charge, definitely two-man couples are busy ones.

The End

Author Bio

I live somewhere in the Northeastern United States and write gay fiction, because there are passions that don't fit in any closet. Please visit my blog to learn more about me or my current work.

Contact & Media Info

[Blog](#)

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MAKING IT WORK

By Cari Z.

Photo Description

A handsome silver-haired man stares into the camera, leaning his head against one hand. He's backlit by the sun, and his face and bare chest are in shadow. He appears both intent and faintly amused, and it's hard to look away from his smoldering eyes.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm sending this on behalf of my boss of whom the picture depicted. Been working with him a couple of years as his law firm as his secretary replacing a string of female secretaries in just a few months.

He's not difficult to work for, my boss is. Honestly. I just think my successors expected too much from him... outside of work. I mean, look at his face! Admittedly, even I have a bit of crush on him. But even I had to face the fact that he's way, waaay out of my reach. Come to think of it, he's never had any romantic involvement with anybody during the years I've worked for him. The only dinner, lunch, or breakfast reservations I have had to make for him were either for work meetings or with his folks. Which reminds me, I have to make one soon for the latter as his folks are coming for a visit the day after tomorrow.

As courteous as he'd been with them, my boss doesn't really seem close or comfortable with his elders. He gave me a short version of his not-so-happy-happy childhood earlier in my days so that I stopped yapping at him to buy meaningful gifts for them. As kind and quiet my boss is, he can be quite stern when he rebukes me. I find this quite sexy, but please don't tell him I say so.

So, dinner reservations for three on next Friday evening... Wait, is that a "4" he wrote in my agenda or I need to have my eyes checked? It IS! Does this mean he'd bring a date to meet the 'rents? How did I miss this? I didn't see him behaving any differently around the office. People who date should've shown some symptoms, shouldn't they? And how come I never known that he's gotten close with anyone; male or female? I'm with him almost 12 hours a day! Well, at the office, on the phones, etc., etc.

I've got to find out more about this!!!

Sincerely,

Didi

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: lawyer, age gap, friends to lovers, humorous, over age 40, slow burn/UST

Word Count: 17,868

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Dedication

Huge thanks to Tiffany, Caitlin and Eloreen, without whom this would have three times as many mistakes. You're all so good to me.

MAKING IT WORK

By Cari Z.

As soon as I got to the office on Wednesday morning, I knew something was wrong.

For starters, my boss' door was closed. The only time he ever closed his door was when he was with a client. The rest of the time he left it open because the man had something against his intercom and refused to use it to let me know when he needed something. There were personal assistants in this building who could go for days without ever speaking to their lawyer in person, just handling errands and delivering files and taking care of business via their computer and the intercom. Not my boss. Not Beau Montgomery.

The second "wrongness" tipoff was the fact that my coffee was stone-cold when I picked it up off my desk. The three of us had a habit of ordering coffee for each other from the shop down the block, depending on who got in first. That meant Beau usually made the order, but the coffee was almost always still hot by the time I got in. I looked across the hall at Lorna, who grimaced and shrugged at me. "It's been this way since I got in," she said.

"And your coffee?"

"Lukewarm," she said ominously. "And I got here at seven." Lorna's start times revolved around how much sleep her almost two-year-old had gotten the night before, which meant she might be in as late as nine or as early as six thirty. Once Lorna was awake, she was awake, a trait her daughter Caroline had apparently inherited.

"How is the birthday girl?"

"Happy that her grandma is there to look after her today. Mark is too, it gave him a chance to sleep in." Lorna pointed a finger at the door. "Back to *that*, though. You don't know what's up?"

"No." I sat on the front edge of my desk, and tapped on the lid of my cup as I considered it. "I left around seven last night. Beau was still here, but he was getting ready to leave too."

"The earliest Starbucks delivers is six-fifteen," Lorna said. "He must have made the order as soon as he came in, for it to be *blah* by the time I got here. So

something happened last night, either here or at home, to make him..." She considered for a moment, then decided on, "Chilly today."

Uh-oh, *chilly*. Not a good descriptor for the man we both at one time or another called boss. Beau wasn't really an effusive guy, but he had a warmth about him, a gentility and friendliness that made him popular with his clients and the other senior partners at Bowman & Sons, as well as his staff. I'd come to work for him with the expectation that I'd be sent back down into the secretarial pool on the first floor after a week, which was what he did with the three candidates for this job just before me. I had expected someone demanding, unreasonable and possibly misogynistic if the comments from one of the girls who preceded me were true.

Instead, I met Beau, who asked me to call him that instead of Mr. Montgomery because, "Please, don't make me sound like my father." He was courteous and professional, and warmed up enough to lift me out of the shark pool and make me his personal assistant after the trial week. In the two years since then, I could count on one hand the number of times he'd left his office door closed in the morning, and one had been because he'd been stuck in traffic during one of Seattle's freak snowstorms. Another had been right after the death of a client. Never without a very good reason.

"Check his messages, it's possible something went wrong with the Davis case," Lorna advised. "Or look at his schedule. Maybe he has to get an emergency root canal or something."

"The Davis case is a slam dunk, we're just waiting for opposing counsel to come back with the signed contracts at this point," I argued as I walked around to my chair and booted up the computer. I could have checked Beau's schedule on my phone; I had access to his work email and files, but I didn't feel like squinting at a tiny screen after a late night out. I stared at my reflection in the dark screen while waiting for it to turn on. I looked... pretty good. No bags under my eyes, my hair very deliberately messy, my shirt crisp and pressed. Not like I'd been clubbing until two a.m. before heading home to get as much sleep as I could cram in before coming in to work. I loved my job, but I wasn't going to let my social life suffer because of it, unlike *some* people I could mention. Not that I ever would.

"You left Saturday free, right?" Lorna reminded me as I opened Beau's schedule. "Year one was bad enough, there's no way I'm having a birthday party for Carrie with a dozen other toddlers at it without plenty of backup."

“Yeah, of course,” I said, skimming the appointment list for the rest of the week.

“And you put it into Beau’s calendar? Because he’s brilliant with corporate mergers but not so good with remembering dates.”

“Yes, I’ve got it.” There it was, Carrie’s second birthday party in pretty pink text. If I could have made it sparkle, I would have. Lorna had been Beau’s longtime personal assistant before taking a year off when her daughter was born, and they were more like family than work acquaintances at this point. Beau was great with Carrie. I had watched, with my own stunned eyes, as she squished a grape all over his gorgeous silk tie while babbling at him during a visit two weeks ago. He had just smiled, cleaned off her hands and gone tie-less for the rest of the day, which I strongly felt he should do more often. I doubt I could get away with Carrie’s method, though.

I scanned the rest of the schedule for anything out of place. There was the teleconference with Trident International, there was his meeting with the other senior partners tomorrow, there was Jackson Hughes’ appointment tomorrow... oh, that would be fun. Jackson was a beautiful man and an incorrigible flirt, and he always came bearing flowers for Lorna and a compliment for me. He was one of Beau’s oldest clients, and they got along like the proverbial house on fire. If Beau was ever going to consider dating someone, it would probably be someone like Jackson: handsome, successful, and outgoing.

The rest of his schedule for the week was pretty open, except for—oh, there. A new appointment with his parents. They came up from Charlotte every few months, more often in the summer when the weather was better, and they always got together with Beau for a meal while they were here.

I had never met Beau’s parents, but I didn’t have a sterling opinion of them. Back when I first started working with Beau and was eager to learn more about him, I’d not-so-delicately broached the upcoming Mother’s Day celebration by asking, “So what would you like me to order for your mom? Or is that something you prefer to take care of yourself?”

Beau had stopped in his tracks on the way into his office and looked at me. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s Mother’s Day this Sunday,” I’d said with a smile. “What would you like to do for your mom? I always get my mother a pair of baseball tickets—she loves the Rockies. We used to go to the games together before I moved out here. What would you like to do?”

“Nothing.”

I stared at him, aghast. “Nothing?” I squeaked.

“No, Eric. Nothing.”

“But she’s your *mother*.” And I knew she wasn’t dead or anything, I’d already scheduled several lunches for them at Canlis on other visits. “Don’t you want to do something special for her?”

“No. That’s a fight I’m not about to have again.” Then he’d walked into his office and closed the door, leaving me confused and feeling like I’d done something wrong.

That was the first time Beau took me out to lunch. On busy days, he ordered in for both of us, but on days he thought he’d been rude, we went out together. It was a level of consideration I’d never had from a boss before, and just made me more confused with regards to his mom. Beau was clearly a thoughtful guy, so why wouldn’t he want to do something special for her? He’d done his best to explain as we fought for a table in one of my favorite cafés.

“I’m not close to either of my parents, I never have been,” Beau said as he waited for his chowder to cool enough to eat. “They didn’t take my coming out well, or my decision to go into law and not banking.”

And *bam*, in one fell swoop he’d answered a question I hadn’t quite been nervy enough to ask. The way he’d gotten rid of his previous, sometimes very *hungry* personal assistants had suggested that he wasn’t interested in being pursued by the ladies, but that wasn’t enough to base assumptions on. Then I caught up on the rest of his statement.

“Wait, your parents are unhappy that you’re a *lawyer*? Isn’t being a successful lawyer the sort of thing most parents pray for when it comes to their kids?”

“I don’t know about most parents, but mine didn’t care for it, no,” Beau had said with a little smile. He was so pretty when he smiled. “My father managed a hedge fund that I was expected to take over. I preferred a job that was more honest.”

“And so you became... a lawyer.”

“Trust me, by comparison? This is much easier on my conscience.”

I had no idea what was involved in being a hedge fund manager, but I’d at least heard of Bernie Madoff. If Beau didn’t want anything to do with that kind

of crap, who was I to say no? “Well, my mother would freaking love you,” I said to him. “In fact, she already does because you have, according to her, *given my life a sense of purpose*.” I loved my mother, but she was such a hippie sometimes. “She sends me your weekly horoscope.” And cue my enormous blush. I hadn’t meant to let that slip.

Beau’s smile got wider. “How does she know my birthday?”

“I... may have mentioned you were a Capricorn at one point. It’s the kind of thing she asks, it’s like knowing that your eyes are blue as far as she’s concerned!” I said defensively. “I’m not sharing anything really personal with her, or anything pertaining to any of your cases, I swear...”

“Eric.” His voice cut through my imminent babble. “It’s fine. Relax. Eat.”

When Beau told me to do something, I did it. Not just because he was my boss, either. There was something about his delivery that just got me, *bam*, right in the chest. It made me feel *happy* to do what he said, which was maybe kind of fucked-up, but clearly worked for me. We ate lunch, and he ended up upgrading my mom’s seats from the nosebleeds to practically right behind home plate, which made her wax rhapsodic about Beau’s karma for five straight minutes when I next called her.

More crumbs of information dropped about Beau’s family as time went on, and none of them left me with a great impression. The little that Lorna shared with me when she came back to work didn’t make Beau’s past any less murky, and I decided not to pry. Beau was friendly, but he was also my boss, and his past was none of my business. His parents were nothing more than names on a screen to me, and all I had to do with them was book a table for three at—

Wait. A table for *four*? No, that had to be wrong. Four people implied that Beau was bringing a date to their dinner, and as far as I knew, Beau didn’t date. He hadn’t in the two years I’d known him. He didn’t take days off, he didn’t schedule weekend getaways. He didn’t even eat out unless it was for a business meeting or with his folks. So what was this, then?

“Lorna,” I said slowly. “Are you aware... I mean... is Beau dating someone?”

Lorna snorted. “Are you kidding me? He hasn’t dated anyone, really dated them, since Richard, and that was four years ago.” Her gaze narrowed a bit. “Why do you ask?”

“Because...” It suddenly occurred to me that maybe I wasn’t supposed to be spreading this around. Lorna and Beau were good friends, but if he was dating someone and hadn’t told her yet, there had to be a good reason for it. I plastered on a quick smile. “It’s nothing, I was just wondering. Since, you know, Carrie’s party is coming up. I thought he might bring a date or something.”

“Right, because the best time to introduce your significant other to your closest friends is at a toddler’s birthday party,” Lorna deadpanned. “Let them see you handle the chaos that is chocolate cake and bouncy castles, it’s a surefire turn on. Eric,” and now her voice took on a lilt that I knew to fear, “are you wondering because you’ve finally decided to declare yourself?”

“What? No! Shut up,” I snapped at her.

“You know we could get around the conflict of interest thing by switching desks. Papa Bowman doesn’t care who he has for an assistant as long as his files are enlarged enough that he can see them around the cataracts.”

I shook my head. “You just want your old job back. I’m not falling for it.”

“Honestly.” and now the lilt was gone, replaced by something more sincere. I chanced a look at Lorna, and saw her staring at me with a soft expression. “I only mentioned it because I really do think you guys could work.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not going to be that kind of cliché. I’m not trying to get in Beau’s pants, thank you very much.”

“You don’t have to try, he’d *let* you in, I’m sure of it! Belt off, zipper down, everything but a welcome mat laid out for you.”

“It’s unprofessional, and overreaching, and he’s a brilliant corporate lawyer while I am a glorified secretary, and just *no*.”

“Fine,” Lorna said, pursing her lips as she sat back and looked at her computer. “You don’t want to think about it, that’s fine. But don’t go and denigrate our jobs just because you have self-esteem issues, Eric. The work we do is what lets our ‘brilliant’ lawyers get their jobs done, and it’s important.”

How had I turned the morning into such a clusterfuck in so little time? “You’re right,” I said apologetically. Lorna didn’t say anything. “Really, you’re right, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Shouldn’t you be working?”

Oh ouch, now it was going to be the cold shoulder until I made amends. I knew Beau used to send her flowers when he screwed up, but I didn’t want to copy him. I made my own mistakes; I’d find my own way to make amends.

First things first, though. I needed to make this reservation. A big part of me wanted to knock on Beau's door and confirm that he really meant four—maybe it was all a mistake, a typo that could be laughed off. If it wasn't, though, I'd probably regret asking, and I'd already committed enough faux pas that morning. I called up Canlis, made the reservation with the very friendly hostess, then got to work. I spent a few hours conferring with Research on some of the information Beau was going to need for upcoming cases, spot-checked a few briefs before forwarding them to him, and answered calls from way too many people who wanted a piece of Beau's time.

Beau was the only senior partner at the firm who wasn't part of the Bowman clan, and that made him desirable to a lot of prospective clients. Bowman & Sons was a successful, very profitable firm, but the family motto seemed to be, "Don't fuck with me, because I will *end* you." All five of them, from Bowman senior to his youngest daughter, Jennifer, were long on aggression and short on charm. They got results, but they often left hard feelings behind. Beau was the exact opposite, but managed to do just as well for himself. Thus, the inundation of requests for his time. I'd had clients try to bribe me to get a meeting with him with everything from boat rides to Super Bowl tickets, which was just disgusting.

Especially since the Broncos lost. I still owed Beau fifty bucks for that, damn it. You'd think the man would have some loyalty and stick with the Panthers but no; he was a Seahawks fan all the way.

At half an hour before noon, I stepped out into the main hall and dialed up Mark. "I need your help," I told him.

"Did you annoy Lorna?"

"Yes," I sighed. "Are you guys coming for lunch?"

"Yeah. Carrie's been asking for her mother all morning, naturally, and poor Grandma's at her wit's end."

"Can you bring a cupcake from Cupcake Royale with you?" I'd have ordered one myself, but it was on the way from Mark and Lorna's house, and I didn't want to go out any longer than I had to with her upset at me.

"What do I get out of this?"

"A happy wife," I said sincerely. "And a happy wife means a happy life, or so I've heard. And I'll make it up to you with a bottle of your favorite scotch at the next company party."

“Done. No, sweetie, it isn’t Mommy, it’s Uncle Eric,” Mark said, and I heard Carrie’s baby-high squeal of delight. It made me smile, despite my crappy morning. “We’ll be there soon.”

“I’m aquiver with anticipation,” I said sincerely.

“Dude, you should be.” Mark hung up, and I went back to my desk to sweat out the minutes until lunch.

Mark and Co. were about five minutes late, but Lorna’s annoyance evaporated when she saw Carrie running down the hall, pretty in a pink dress, patent leather shoes and a purple cowboy hat. Never let it be said the DeLaureo girls didn’t know how to accessorize. “There she is!” Lorna cooed, and caught her daughter as she hurled herself at her mother’s legs. “How’s my sweetheart today?”

“Energetic,” Lorna’s mother said wryly as she sat down in her daughter’s chair with a sigh. Mark carried up the rear, and plopped a red velvet cream cheese cupcake down on Lorna’s desk with a little flourish.

“Aww, honey, you didn’t have to get me that.”

“It’s from Eric,” he said, and I loved him so much in that moment.

Lorna turned to look at me. I smiled hopefully. “Oh, stop it,” she sighed. “You’re forgiven. Just don’t be an idiot again.”

“I wish I could promise that, but I’m pretty sure I’d be lying,” I said.

The moment was broken by Carrie, who looked at me and shrieked, “Red!” She held her arms out toward me, and I took her with a grin.

I had been Red since Carrie could speak, back when Eric was still a little too hard. It was an obvious nickname; my hair was the kind of bright red you usually only got out of a bottle. I was pale and freckled, broad-shouldered and lanky, and in another life, I’d probably been an Irish step dancer, because I had fast feet and a good sense of rhythm that didn’t come from either of my parents.

Carrie bounced her shiny shoes off my hip and said a string of words that made no sense, but I nodded anyway. “You don’t say.”

“Yes!”

“Oh, you do! Well, that’s different then.”

“No!”

“No, it’s not?”

“Are you arguing with a two-year-old?”

I spun around and looked at Beau, standing in his open doorway with a little smile on his face. The PA in me took note of the faint silver stubble along his jaw, the fact that he was wearing his reading glasses despite hating the things, the lack of tie—all signs of fatigue. The admirer in me insisted that the stubble was sexy, the glasses were cute and losing the tie was a great first step. I reined in my unprofessional side and said, “I’m trying to agree with her, actually. She’s just being difficult.”

“Canny,” Lorna corrected, peeling the paper away from her cupcake. “Carrie is canny. She might make a great lawyer someday.”

“Oh yeah?” Carrie reached toward Beau, and he took her easily, making my heart flutter a little bit. Don’t get me wrong, babies weren’t really a thing with me; I didn’t have any little nieces or nephews of my own, and the only child I spent any time with at all was Carrie. But there was something about seeing how the tension in Beau’s broad shoulders eased as he looked at the beaming little girl that made me stupidly mushy.

“What do you think, sweetheart?” Beau asked. “Do you want to be a lawyer someday?”

Carrie considered for a moment, and then nodded decisively. “Yes! ’Cuz Mommy.”

“Because then you’d get to spend all day with your mommy?”

“Yes.”

Beau chuckled. “Looks like you win, Lorna.”

“Of course I win,” his former PA said tartly, coming over and taking Carrie back before she secured her grip around Beau’s glasses. “I’m *Mommy*. And right now, Mommy wants a real lunch, not just sugar, good as it is.” Mark was finishing off the rest of the cupcake, clearly more than happy to make sugar a big part of *his* lunch. “We’ve got reservations at Seastar, but you two are welcome to join us.”

“Work,” Beau said, taking his glasses off and rubbing to soothe the indents on the bridge of his nose. “But feel free to go, Eric.”

I suppressed a frown and said instead, “I’ve got plenty to do here. I’ll order something in for us.”

“Fine. Mark, Gwendolyn—” Of course he remembered Lorna’s mother’s name. “Have a good day. I’ll see you both Saturday.”

“Bee!” Carrie declared, and Beau smiled for her.

“You too, sweetheart,” he told her. Lorna grabbed her jacket and purse, and the little family left, and Beau headed back into his office. I stopped him before he could close the door, though.

“Quick question,” I said before I could lose my nerve. “On your schedule, I saw that you need a reservation for four on Friday. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” Uh-oh, single-syllable answers, that wasn’t a good sign. Nevertheless, I forged ahead. Might as well go for broke while I had the chance.

“Whose name should I put down for the reservation?” I smiled a little. “Are you seeing someone special?” It would be more than a little depressing if he was, but I still kind of hoped for it. Beau deserved to be with someone who could see how fantastic he was.

“Leave it generic.”

“But—”

“Eric.” Beau stared straight at me from where he stood beside his desk, and I froze like a deer in the headlights. “Just do it, please.”

“Yes, sir.” I shut the door behind me and exhaled slowly. *Yikes*. That was the voice of someone on his last nerve, someone doing his damndest to keep from yelling. Being Beau, of course it meant tacking a “please” onto the end of it, but that did nothing to soften the authority of his voice. I usually loved it when he got all authoritative, but today there was no humor to soften the blow, no pat on the back or clap on the shoulder. It was just Beau, impatient and tired, and me, too slow at doing my job. I was supposed to lessen his stress, not add to it. Chastened, I sat back down at my desk and got back to work.

The reservations were easy, Beau was a regular patron of Canlis and it was one of the few restaurants in Seattle that his mother approved of, apparently. I worked steadily through his schedule for the next two weeks, noting his court appearances, the files that would have to be pulled for briefs, the prep time for meetings with opposing counsel... nothing else personal. Not a hint.

“Eric?”

“Huh?” I hadn’t even heard Beau come out of his office; I’d been too absorbed in my computer.

“Where’s lunch?”

“What?”

“It’s been forty-five minutes. Lunch?”

Shit, fuck, goddamn son of a bitch motherfucker. “I’m so sorry,” I said slowly, knowing my face was almost as red as my hair. I couldn’t lie to save my life, my tendency to flush at the first hint of discomfort gave me away every time. “I completely forgot to order it. I just got caught up with work. I’ll do it now.” I reached for the file folder of delivery menus, silently cursing myself.

“Don’t bother.”

“No, you need to eat,” I said resolutely, looking at the menus. “Is Italian okay?”

“Eric.” All of a sudden, Beau’s hand was on my shoulder, the touch light enough that I wanted to push back into it, just to get more of the shivery sensation Beau’s hands always gave me. “It’s fine. Let’s go out, I need a break from the office anyway.”

“You want... me to go with you?” I clarified.

“I don’t want to go out to eat on my own.”

“Just checking,” I said with a sigh of relief. “Thanks. Just let me shut this off...”

“I’ll meet you downstairs in five minutes,” he said, heading back into his office. I watched him go, feeling a little whiplashed by his mercurial mood today, but not about to object to being taken out to lunch by Beau.

I beat him down to the lobby and waited on a bench near the front desk. The receptionist was named Amanda, and she had been one of the hopefuls a couple of years ago that Beau had given the boot. Needless to say, we weren’t friends.

“Running some errands for your boss?” she asked me once she finished a call.

“I’m not running anywhere—” I spread my arms out and gestured to myself. “—Obviously. I’m sitting. I like this bench.”

“Picking something up, then?”

“Nope.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Waiting for someone?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because if my secretary was wasting time sitting around in the lobby without a good reason, I’d definitely want to know about it,” Amanda mused. “Maybe I should let Mr. Montgomery know.”

“Maybe you should,” I agreed. “Oh look, here he comes!” I waved as Beau got off the elevator. He’d put his jacket and tie back on, but left the jacket unbuttoned. The silver-gray suit was a shade or two darker than his hair, and looked amazing on him. Undone by bits and pieces, Beau still looked good, but when he put everything together, he was just edible.

I smiled at Beau, and then turned back to Amanda. “Now’s your chance.”

“Chance for what?” Beau asked.

“Nothing, Mr. Montgomery,” she said so cheerfully that I almost couldn’t hear the sound of her molars grinding together.

He looked at her for a long moment, then turned away. “Ready for lunch?”

“I’m starving,” I assured him. We left the Bowman & Sons building and walked down to the closest seafood café. The lunch rush was over, so we got a table pretty fast, and our food a few minutes later. Beau got the chowder, of course; I don’t think he ever ordered anything different when we came here. I got a catfish po’ boy and we each had coffee, because this was Seattle and because, honestly, you could never have too much.

I decided to open the gates, so to speak. “I’m sorry for prying earlier. That was rude.”

“You were fine,” Beau said immediately. “You just caught me in a bad mood. I’d hoped this particular dinner tradition was over since my parents didn’t bother last year, but then my mother called me last night, convinced that she was dying and made her request.”

I almost dropped the spoon I was using to stir in the cream. “Your mother is dying?” I choked. I knew Beau didn’t care much for his parents, but despite that, they were still his... his parents! I’d be a complete and utter wreck if my mother were dying.

“No,” Beau said dryly. “Although I’m sure that’s the reaction she was hoping for. No, my mother is perfectly fine according to my sister, but she likes

to use her supposed ill health as a means to make me do what she wants. In this case, to show her I won't die a bachelor and deny her grandchildren for the rest of her miserable life."

"Uh." *Wow, awkward.* "She knows you're gay, though."

"Yes. She's set on the idea of a surrogate. 'Ah know some looovely young ladies who would be so honored to bear mah grandchild,'" he said, drawing out the high voice and a rolling southern accent. "Never let it be said that my mother can't get her hands on what she wants."

I was caught between wanting to laugh at his impression and being straight-up horrified. "I'm sorry, wait... your mother is pimping potential baby mamas to you?" Because that was a level of invasive that was just wrong.

"She's determined to settle me down with a pack of infants, but in her world that means I have to be married first. Even if it means being married to a man. So she told me to bring someone to dinner, and give her the hope and strength to carry on with life."

Holy shit. "And she does this on a yearly basis?"

"Usually right after her annual physical," Beau said, taking a bite of chowder. He closed his eyes for a moment, savoring it, and I savored right along with him. It was nice to see him really enjoy something, to see the stress from this morning ease off a little. Beau always looked good, but when he was happy, his attractiveness went from "hell yeah" to "transcendental experience."

I cleared my throat and reached for my water. "So who are you taking, then? One of your friends?" I grinned suddenly. "Is it Jackson?" Being charming and tricking people seemed like just his kind of thing.

"Jackson went with me six years ago, and after dinner made me swear never to put a friend through that again." Beau shrugged. "Now I usually put an ad out on Craigslist. 'Pretend to know me, put up with my parents, get a free gourmet dinner.'"

Oh, that was just sad. "Doesn't your mom see right through that?" I asked a little weakly.

"Of course she does. That's half the point." He took another bite of chowder and I stared at him, dumbfounded, because no. Just no. Apart from the general lack of wisdom displayed by placing that kind of ad on Craigslist, of all places, it couldn't be helping the state of the war between Beau and his parents.

Bringing a stranger to a family dinner was a Maginot Line tactic: bold and satisfying in the moment, but in the long run all it was going to get you was outflanked.

Yeah, I studied history in school. Does being a PA pay my loans off faster than tutoring or being a waiter or anything else you can do with a Bachelor's in History? Why yes, yes it does. I still loved it, though.

Back to Beau. "You can do better than that."

"Better than what?"

"Better than suffering through a meal with your parents and a complete stranger!" I exclaimed. "Why should you put up with that just to please your mother? Why shouldn't you actually take someone who cares about making you happy?"

Beau smiled, just a little curve of his lips, but it was enough to make me smash my heel against my instep to keep my body from doing something stupid. "Richard went once too. We broke up about a month after that, actually. It's just easier for me this way, Eric. I don't mind it. I'm a *dutiful* son, if nothing else."

"You are scarily passive-aggressive with your parents," I told him before I could hold it in.

"Yeah, I know. I come by it honestly," he said with a sigh. "Don't worry about it."

"No, I worry. I'm your personal assistant, I'm allowed to worry. What if you take a serial killer to have dinner with your parents? What if it's all 'I'll have the liver and fava beans to go, and oh, this Chianti is lovely!' What then?"

Beau gaped for a long moment before he broke down laughing. He laughed so hard his shoulders shook and he had to put down his spoon. I stared at his bright silver hair and the curve of his ear and the faint lines on his forehead, and felt somewhere between happy and hopeless. Goddamn Beau. Goddamn me for being able to make him laugh like that.

"Jesus, Eric," he sighed after he caught his breath. "Only you could make taking a serial killer to dinner seem like a good time."

"It's supposed to be a scary example, not a funny one," I chided, but my heart wasn't in it. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'll find you a date for Friday

night. Someone vetted, not just some random dude from the creepy section of the Internet.”

“I think you’re missing the part where this isn’t going to be a fun experience,” Beau reminded me. “I don’t want to put another friend through that.”

“We’ve just got to find the right guy,” I said. “There are plenty of men who’d put up with one night of hell a year for the pleasure of dating you.” *Like me.*

“Yeah?” He arched one eyebrow, a trick I’d never mastered despite years of trying. “Where are you hiding all these clearly desperate individuals?”

“I have connections,” I told him confidently. I’d never had a shortage of friends, no matter where I lived, and more than a few of them had met Beau and commented on his silver fox status. This dinner could be a trial by fire for dating him. “Come on, we can make it work,” I begged when he still looked dubious. “I’ll find the *perfect* guy for you, I swear. You won’t regret this.”

Beau stared at me and I met his gaze, unwilling to back down. This was non-negotiable as far as I was concerned. He didn’t have to settle for some random Craigslist hookup when there were plenty of guys out there who would be more than happy to put up with his mother once a year in exchange for the awesomeness that was Beau. I had complete confidence that at least one of those guys was in my circle of friends.

Suddenly, a smile broke out on his face: not the broad, gleaming thing he’d worn when he was laughing or the small, barely-there lip curve he’d given Lorna and her family back at the office. This was a sweet, slightly smug smile that I could have stared at for hours. “It’s a deal,” Beau said.

“Yes! You’re making the right call,” I assured him. “This will be so much better than before. This will be the best awful dinner with your parents ever, I guarantee it.”

“You say it, I believe it,” Beau agreed. “Finish up quick. We’ve got to be back to the office in fifteen minutes.”

Wow, time flew. I scarfed down my mostly cold sandwich, still delicious, polished off my coffee and managed to keep myself stain-free despite my haste. The walk back to work was quiet but comfortable, and as we both settled into the afternoon rush, my newfound confidence buoyed my mood back up to its awesome sprightly levels. And by sprightly, I meant my “move aside,

motherfucker, I am the god of office efficiency!” mood. Lorna put up with it pretty well, all things considered, although she’d confiscated all of my fluorescent Post-its last week after I’d flown one too many hot pink paper airplanes decorated with motivational slogans her way.

“Who poured crack in your coffee?” she asked me at five as she prepared to leave. I didn’t follow suit—there was still work to be done, and while I was eager to get going on the whole date thing, I didn’t have any pressing reason to get out of the office. Wednesday was my DVR love and Mom-calling night, because one couldn’t party all the time, no matter how hard I’d tried in college.

“I don’t need artificial stimulants to kick ass,” I told Lorna as I forwarded Research’s precedent files to Beau’s inbox. “I’m perfectly capable of turning my frown upside down all on my own.”

“Really? Because this morning you were downright morose, and all afternoon you’ve been... perky.” She came over and glanced in my trashcan. “Ah. Beau took you out to lunch. No wrappers,” she added when I stared at her. “Plus there’s no scent of air freshener, which there would be if you’d eaten in because you’ve got a love affair with garlic.”

“I always brush afterward,” I said automatically, impressed despite myself. “Jesus, Carrie’s teenage years are going to be hell having Sherlock as a mom.”

“Nonsense, we’ll be the best of friends.”

“Keep telling yourself that when she comes home with a new boyfriend, a new piercing and an application for Stanford all in the same week,” I taunted. Not that I’d done that, but according to my grandma, my mother had. And that had been a good week.

“Goodnight, Eric.”

“Night, Lorna.” She walked out, and a minute later, Beau called me into his office.

“You don’t have to stay,” he told me, glancing up from his screen. He had the glasses on again, and I held onto the doorframe as a precaution against melting into the floor. “I’ve got a handle on the rest of this.”

“Yeah, but you’ve been here since, like, six in the morning. If anyone should go home, it’s you,” I told him. It was a familiar argument, and one I was fully prepared to follow through with, but a second later, he took the glasses off, sat back and stretched. He arched his back, stretched his long, buff arms up over his head, and I did my best not to let my jaw drop.

“Maybe you’re right,” Beau said as he relaxed a moment later, much to my relief. “Do you have any plans tonight?”

“Calling my mother and Game of Thrones,” I said. “Because at least I know better than to get attached to anyone on that show. I’m never watching The Good Wife again, by the way.”

Beau grimaced. “Yeah, I wasn’t too pleased when they killed off—”

“Don’t even speak of it, I’m still traumatized.”

“You poor thing,” he teased me, and there was something about the way his accent came through when he said “thing” that made me sigh. Fuck me; I was really off kilter today if my compartmentalization was failing me so completely.

“Fine, so, home for both of us,” I said briskly. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning, and if I don’t beat you in to work, I’ll set Lorna on you.”

“Scary.”

“I know. This is me playing hardball.”

Beau leaned forward, opened his mouth as if he wanted to speak, but hesitated. I knew that I had to flee. What if he was having second thoughts about me finding him a date? I couldn’t give him a chance to talk me out of it, because the man was persuasive as hell. “Okay, gotta go, Daenerys awaits! See you tomorrow, Beau.”

“See you,” he echoed, and I shut down my computer, grabbed my jacket and left the office with a sigh of relief.

Watching Game of Thrones ended up taking a backseat to making myself a home-cooked meal, because too much takeout would kill me someday, and calling my mom. Some boyfriends had called me a mama’s boy. I just called them jealous.

“Hi, hon.”

“Hey.” I stirred the noodles in the pot on the stove and decreased the heat a little. “How are you?”

“I’m good! Grading papers, drinking tea, watching baseball... it’s a lovely evening in.”

“How’re the Rockies doing?”

“Actually, it’s a Mariners game. I figure I should get a handle on their players if I’m going to be watching them in person.”

That was news to me. “When are you going to a Mariners game?”

“When I come out to visit over the summer, hon.”

“Were you planning on informing me of this at some point?” I demanded.

“That’s what I’m doing right now,” she said calmly, making me feel like an idiot. “Don’t worry—it’s all taken care of. Beau got me the tickets as an early birthday present.”

My boss got her... “Since when has Beau been buying you birthday presents?”

“Oh, just this year, after I mentioned how much I appreciated the great seats he got me for the Rockies last time. He’s such a nice man, Eric. I’m glad you’ve got someone like that for a friend.”

“Mom, he’s not my friend, he’s my boss,” I told her sternly. “Please don’t make me look unprofessional.”

“I think he’s both, clearly, or he wouldn’t be so nice to me,” my mother replied. “I always call your best friends on their birthdays, remember? Joey? Ishmael? I called Zach just last week. None of them mind. And it’s not as though I solicited the tickets or anything, Beau bought them of his own volition, so calm down and stop scolding me.”

“Sorry,” I said with a wince. Maybe she was right. I was being too sensitive. “Long day.”

“I understand. I’ll let you get back to your dinner, Eric.”

“And I’ll let you get back to your ball game. Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too, hon.”

We hung up, and I thought about what she’d said as I drained the pasta, then tossed it with garlic and olive oil and poured it into a nice Italian ceramic bowl. Maybe it wasn’t impossible for me to be friends with Beau. After all, he’d been friends with Lorna forever, and she’d been his personal assistant a lot longer than I had. The scenario was undeniably different, but he did the same things for her that he did for me: the coffee buying, taking her out to the occasional lunch, coming to her daughter’s birthday party—okay, not that one for me, but he’d come to my housewarming party, that had to count for something.

In fact, he'd given me this pasta bowl. The set of four was the nicest thing in my cupboards.

I'd moved into my own place about three months ago, when my roommate Aaron indicated that he was making an offer on a house and might not be around once the lease was up. His offer fell through, but I left anyway. We were still good friends; in fact, we were supposed to meet up tomorrow to go clubbing at—

Oh. Aaron. He'd be perfect for Beau. I'd been running friends through my head all evening, weighing their good points and bad points, and Aaron had far more of the former. He was an engineer at a local biotech company, he had travelled a lot overseas, he was good looking, and he was almost extroverted at times—I mean for an engineer, he was downright chatty. He and Beau had talked for almost an hour at the housewarming party, something about the Greek Isles and sailboats.

Perfect. I should feel happier about my deductive success. Hunger was probably sapping my energy. I carried my bowl and a fork into the living room, and cued up the newest Game of Thrones episode. I would call Aaron with the good news tomorrow.

I was the first one to the office the next morning, which meant I ordered the coffee for everyone, turned on the lights and booted up the computer. It was kind of nice being the first one in, quiet in a way the office rarely was, and I hummed as I scanned the calendar for any new additions to today's schedule. Client phone call, client meeting, Jackson's visit—that one was in candy-apple red—and then a partner meeting right after that in the conference room. Easy enough. I made a few notes, got a few things printing for the meeting, sent a quick email to Aaron and then lost myself to Amazon's toy section. There were so many options; it was hard to decide what to get for Carrie. I forwarded a few selections to Beau, just in case he hadn't shopped for her yet.

My phone dinged. New message from Aaron.

I'm sorry, did you just pimp out your boss to me?

I smiled.

No, because you couldn't afford him like that. This is a genuine invitation to go on a genuine date. Admittedly, it's going to suck but that won't be his fault.

Why would I want to go on a shitty date with Beau?

Oh Aaron, forever missing the bigger picture.

Think of this date as your trial by fire. The doors to dating him like a normal person will be blown wide open, pun totally intended.

What makes you think I even want to go on a date with him?

I frowned at my phone.

Because everyone with eyes does. Plus you've met him, you guys have talked, can you honestly tell me you're not attracted to him? Don't lie, be honest.

Point.

Damn right, I had a point.

But does he have any idea you're doing this?

Yep. All above board, totally not creepy and you're saving him from taking a potential serial killer to dinner with his parents. His backup plan is Craigslist, dude. Not cool.

So why don't you go with him, then?

I didn't want to get into that now.

Look, in or out? If in, tonight we skip clubbing to dress you like a normal person.

There's nothing wrong with the way I dress!

I scoffed.

Whatever you say, Mr. Rogers.

“Who's that?”

“Whoa!” I spun around in my chair so fast I almost fell out of it, clutching my phone to my chest. Beau was standing to the side of me, looking impeccable in a dark gray suit and blue tie. “How did you sneak in here?”

“I spend my weekends moonlighting as a ninja,” he replied, and my heart gave a little quiver at his perfectly deadpan delivery. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I said, releasing my death grip on my phone and setting it face down on my desk. It dinged, but I ignored it. “I'm fine, no problems. Just talking with

a friend, it can wait until later. Good morning! You look..." *Amazing*. "Well rested."

Beau smiled and shrugged a little. "I'm feeling a lot better about tomorrow. That definitely helped to relax me."

"Great! Glad I could help. It's going to go well, I promise." My phone dinged again, and I sincerely hoped it wasn't Aaron telling me he'd decided not to do this after all.

"Maybe you should get that," Beau suggested as he headed into his office. I waited for him to sit down at his desk before furtively glancing at my screen. Two new texts.

I do NOT look like Mr. Rogers.

Fine, I'm in.

Oh, bless you, Aaron. *You're my favorite person ever*, I replied. *I can be over by 7.*

Bring food.

That was fair. I texted an assent, added a reminder to my schedule, and put my phone away. Time to get to work.

Lorna got in a few minutes later, and we spent an easy morning together in relative quiet. She checked her phone every ten minutes or so, laughing a little with each new message, and finally I had to know. "What are you looking at?"

"Mom took Carrie to the zoo today," she replied. "You've got to see this." Naturally, that meant *me* getting out of *my* chair to go and look at what she wanted me to see, but I didn't mind. I walked over to her desk and bent down to see her phone. A picture of Carrie wearing an otter hat and standing jubilant in front of the...

"Is that a sloth bear exhibit?" I asked, a bit incredulously, because *what?*

"Yeah. It's the closest thing they've got to actual sloths, which Carrie is obsessed with since her dad showed her baby sloth videos on YouTube." Lorna smiled indulgently. "About the only time she goes slow these days is when she's pretending to be a sloth. It's very cute, except when we're trying to get somewhere and she only wants to crawl on all fours."

"Every child is a mystery to be solved," I said. Lorna rolled her eyes.

“Thank you, Don Juan. Not the best misquote you’ve ever given me, I have to say.”

“How about ‘It’s not about what it is, it’s about what it can become.’”

“*The Lorax*. Not bad,” Lorna complimented me. “I almost tied my tongue in a knot reading *Fox In Socks* last night.”

“Was it the part with the poodle battle?” a voice asked from behind us. I whirled around and saw Jackson standing there, handsome and smiling in a dark suit and holding an elaborate bouquet tied with a little bow that he handed to Lorna. “That’s the part that gets me. I have nephews,” he confided.

“These are lovely,” Lorna said. “I so rarely get gifts anymore.”

“I got you a cupcake just yesterday!” I exclaimed.

“That was an apology present, it doesn’t count.”

“Oh, Eric,” Jackson tsked. “Have you been naughty? Did you upset the queen?”

“The queen needs to learn how to let go,” I said. “And you aren’t supposed to be here for another half hour, Mr. Hughes.”

Jackson’s dark eyes sparkled as he stepped a little closer to me. He was a few inches shorter than me and about a decade older, but still good looking enough to make my breath catch a little. He had black, curly hair and Mediterranean bronze skin, exactly the kind of skin I envied because I would never be able to approximate it myself. He was gorgeous, and he knew it. “Beau moved things up a bit so we could have longer to go over the details of the latest incorporation. We’re actually going out to lunch at The Kingfish Café, you should come with us.”

Kingfish was one of my favorite restaurants, and not one I had the money or opportunity to go to very often. But I had too much to do to get things ready for Beau’s weekly meeting with the other senior partners tomorrow morning. “I can’t,” I said, a little regretfully.

“Beau works you too hard,” he said, setting a warm hand on my shoulder.

Or not hard enough. I struggled to repress my nascent blush and shrugged. “I like what I do.”

“You must, to—”

“Jackson,” Beau’s voice was sterner than usual, especially for a client. It went straight to my knees, and I was glad I was already leaning against a desk. “Leave Eric alone.”

Jackson grinned and held up his hands peaceably. “It’s just small talk, sweetheart. You know there’s no room in my heart for any man but you.” He batted his eyelashes coquettishly. “I was just inviting your assistant to lunch with us, I’m sure his perspective would come in handy.” God, everything the man said could be considered innuendo. Usually I enjoyed it, but today I felt a little withdrawn for some reason. I didn’t say anything, just stared at Beau, waiting.

Beau looked between the two of us, then pointed at Jackson and said, “You, out. I’ll be with you in a minute.” Then he gave me the smile I’d been hoping for and said, “I would ask you to come with us, but I know there’s still a lot to do for tomorrow and I don’t want to make you stay late.”

“It’s fine,” I said. And it was, everything was fine. Go with, stay late... something slightly shameful in me wanted to spend as much time as possible with Beau before his dinner date tomorrow, because then he’d be spoken for, and it wouldn’t be the same.

“Still.” Beau pulled on his jacket and picked up his briefcase, then crossed over to me. I smelled his spicy cologne over the scent of Lorna’s flowers, and I inhaled slow and deep, trying to be circumspect. “I know you like their food. I’ll bring you back something.”

“Thank you,” I breathed. I heard what might have been a snicker from someone, but I was too wrapped up in maintaining my dignity to care. Beau touched my shoulder, the same one Jackson had briefly held, then left with his client.

“You’re an idiot.”

I shook my head, dispelling the haze in my mind, then frowned at Lorna. “What?”

“Oh no, I don’t want to start another fight,” she said, and then stood up. “I’m going to go put these in water.”

“You are impossible!” I yelled after her.

“Takes one to know one!” she yelled back before disappearing around the corner.

I thought Lorna enjoyed being cryptic. I headed back to my desk and dove into the caseload up for discussion at tomorrow's meeting, getting Beau's contributions ready to go and making sure he had notes on what the other senior partners would be bringing up. Because all the rest of them were family, it wasn't unusual for them to discuss cases outside of work, and sometimes Beau got left behind when someone forgot to bring him up to speed. Personally, I thought it was time the firm expanded, because they were working their staff pretty hard as it was, and it would probably do them some good to get some fresh blood into the upper echelons. Unfortunately, no one had asked for my opinion, so I just did my best to make sure that Beau wasn't going to be blindsided tomorrow.

The smell of fresh food finally roused me, and I looked up just as Beau set a takeaway container on my desk. "Oh my God." I leaned forward and inhaled deeply. "You got me gumbo?"

"There's cornbread in there, too," Beau said, the corners of his eyes crinkling just a bit. I suppose it was kind of funny to see me salivating over a Styrofoam box, but this was seriously good gumbo. If I ever actually went to New Orleans, I would probably eat myself to death.

"You are a god among men," I declared, popping open the box. Oh, wow... I shut my eyes for a second, just savoring.

"I'll be... in my office." Beau walked away, and when I broke out of my food haze, it was to see Jackson standing there, hands in his pockets, looking at me inscrutably. There was a hint of a smile on his face, but it wasn't the flirty kind I was used to.

"You're a lucky man," he told me quietly. I nodded because, yeah, just look at my lunch. He set a hand on my desk and bent forward. "Don't fuck this up," he murmured, then pulled back and grinned. "Take it easy, Eric. I'll talk to you later, Beau," he called out.

"Thanks, Jack." He left, and I stared after him blankly. *Fuck what up?* I wanted to ask Lorna what she thought, but she'd taken a late lunch to go and meet up with her family, so there went that hope. *Fuck up... eating lunch? Doing my job? Working with Beau?*

The last one made me shiver a bit. I wasn't going to fuck up what I had with Beau, that was like my number one priority. He counted on me to be an excellent personal assistant, and that was what I was going to be, prurient

dreams be damned. I pulled the spare spoon I kept in my drawer out and dug into my gumbo decisively.

“Eric?”

“Mmpgh?” I swallowed too quickly, the food scraping my throat on the way down, which set me coughing. I rolled my chair back from the desk and covered my mouth, but the hacking wouldn't cease. Goddamn, that was *spicy*.

A firm hand patted my back, smoothing a circle between my shoulder blades. I coughed for another minute or so, gradually catching my breath, before I groaned. “Sorry,” I whispered, my throat still a little raw.

“It's fine. Hang on.” Beau left and came back a moment later with a glass of water, fresh from the dispenser in his office. I sipped gratefully and wiped my watering eyes on a napkin.

“Shit,” I sighed, then backtracked. “Shoot. Is what I meant.” I met Beau's eyes sheepishly. “Food went down the wrong tube. What were you going to say?”

“When you're done with your lunch—and don't rush, I don't want you to keel over,” he added, “I've got notes from my meeting with Jackson that I need transcribed.”

I smiled wryly. “Forget your iPad again?”

“Don't even mention that thing in my presence,” Beau said, joking but not quite. He gestured toward the glass in my hand. “Do you want a little more?”

“Sure, but I can get it—”

“Eat,” he told me, taking the glass. He refilled it and brought it back out, and I sat and ate and reflected on the weirdness that was my day so far. I ate fast but carefully, not wanting to disrupt things with another bout of coughing, then bagged up the dregs and threw them away. I forwarded my prep work for tomorrow to Beau's inbox, and then walked into his office.

“Where are the notes?” I asked.

“Here.” He handed me a sheaf of loose papers and his iPad. “Would you mind putting them directly into the devil machine for me?”

“I can do it faster on my own computer,” I said.

“But you could do it on my iPad in here.”

I must have looked confused, because he continued, “I don’t have any more client meetings this afternoon, and you’ve got the majority of your work done for the day. It’ll be easier to heckle you about the Rockies if you’re in here with me.”

“Oh, ha-ha,” I said, relaxing automatically and sitting in the chair across from his. “I’m sorry, who has the better record at this point, the Rockies or the Mariners?” I cupped my chin and looked up at the ceiling for a moment. “Oh, right, it’s the Rockies! It must have slipped my mind, with all this work my boss keeps piling on me.”

“You’re cruising for more work than you can handle if you’re not careful,” Beau warned, but his eyes were shining and his voice was light as he turned back to his computer.

“I think I can handle just about anything you can dish out,” I said confidently.

“I will remember you said that.”

Oh my God, I couldn’t handle that tone of voice right now. I was too on edge; off my game just enough to feel every tremor like it was an earthquake. I crossed my legs and took refuge behind the iPad, discretion being the better part of my valor. I needed to get myself together, I really did. The sooner I got Beau and Aaron together, the sooner I could get over living the unrequited life.

We both got lost in work for a while, and eventually I was confident enough to converse like a normal person again, talking about his caseload, the meeting tomorrow, a little about Jackson...

“The way he tans is *disgusting*,” I muttered as I proofed one of Beau’s briefs. Technically, he could use someone else to do that, but I had mad skills and he knew it. “Where did he fly in from, anyway?”

“Brazil. He inherited a stake in a construction company down there from his grandfather, and business is booming right now. He wants to get the legal stuff out of the way before diving in, though.”

“Right. World Cup, Olympics, urban redevelopment. Busy place.”

“Are you a soccer fan?”

“They call it ‘football,’” I said haughtily. “And yes, as a matter of fact, I do like it. One of my boyfriends in college was from Edinburgh. I had to put up

with being dragged to obscure bars at obscene hours to watch matches for four months. I lost interest in him, but not in the game.”

“Right.” Beau fell silent for a moment, then changed the subject to American football, which was nice because we could really fight about that. We started off by arguing about the draft and somehow got to the point where I played him Eminem’s song “The Monster” because it mentioned Russell Wilson.

“That’s how you know you’ve arrived,” I said once the song was done. “When you get written into verse, immortalized by a modern-day bard.”

“I sincerely hope you’re not comparing Eminem to Shakespeare,” Beau replied skeptically.

“You scoff, but there’s a lot of truth to that comparison. Who do you think more high school students can quote, Marshall Mathers or William Shakespeare?”

“If I let high schoolers define the basis of my self-worth, I’d be in my grave by now,” Beau shot back.

I shook my head. “It must be a generational thing.”

“It might be,” Beau said with a sigh, looking uncomfortably solemn all of a sudden. “Eric, are you sure... about dinner tomorrow night, I mean?”

“Absolutely,” I said instantly. I wasn’t going to let him wriggle out of my help now. “No take backs. You’re going to dinner and you’re going to have a good time, I swear.”

“But will you?”

Would I what? Have a good time helping him? “I already am,” I replied with complete sincerity.

Beau didn’t say anything, just stared at me for a long moment. I stared back, held willing captive by his bright blue eyes. It was a strange, fraught moment, and I felt like I might crawl out of my skin if I couldn’t—

Ding. That was my phone, and it wasn’t a message alert, it was a schedule notification. I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was already six-thirty. “Damn,” I said. “I’ve got to go.”

“No, that’s fine.” Beau wiped a hand over his face. It wasn’t the tired gesture of yesterday, more like he was pushing the reset button. “I should, too. It’s late.”

“Yeah.” I stood up and rolled my shoulders, feeling a satisfying crack between my shoulder blades. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

Beau smiled softly. “Tomorrow. Goodnight, Eric.”

“Night.” I turned, grabbed my jacket and booked it out of there. I’d have to go with cheap and dirty food if I wanted to get to Aaron’s on time. Unfortunately, his palette was similar to Beau’s, hoity with a side of toity. So, pizza. Throw some spinach and prosciutto on it, and voila, insta-fancy.

I was still ten minutes late, but Aaron wasn’t bothered. “Get in here,” he said after opening his door to my knock. “I’m starving.”

“I’m amazed you haven’t starved without me,” I said, coming inside and toeing off my shoes. The apartment didn’t really bear much resemblance to the place I’d lived anymore, since all my stuff was gone and Aaron had gotten newer—read better—furniture, but it still sort of felt like home. The smell was familiar, at least.

“I can, in fact, feed myself,” Aaron said. “And I plan to, right now.” He took the pizza out of my hand and headed for the kitchen.

Before we’d eaten on barstools at the counter, but now Aaron had an actual dining room table, right where we used to have the Wii set up. We sat down and ate and talked about our day like real adults, and the rightness of this cemented in my mind. Aaron was a good match for Beau. He was mature, he was smart, he was moving up. One dramatic date and then they could go out like normal people.

“So,” I said, wiping my fingers off and dropping my napkin on the table. “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” Aaron agreed. He looked... not excited, but not downcast. Pensive, I suppose. “I’m not actually sure why you need me for this.”

I frowned. “Aren’t you supposed to have a great memory? You’re helping me save Beau from a downward spiral of familial hatred and interpersonal angst by being his date for a dinner with his parents. After which, I sincerely hope you go on a date for real, because he could use a boyfriend.”

“You’ve been crushing on him for over a year,” Aaron pointed out. “This is definitely something you could do. And if—” He held up a hand to forestall my inevitable arguments. “If your worry is that being his date for the evening is unprofessional, then you simply have to tell him that you’re there as a personal favor, and then let things go back to normal.”

“I can’t,” I said with a sigh. “I thought about it, but I can’t.” I wasn’t even being facetious, I really had considered this option for all of, oh, a second. “The thing is, I don’t think I’d be able to go back to normal that easy. I’m... I really like him.”

Aaron stared at me through his dark-rimmed glasses, searching for something. “Yet you’re throwing him at me.”

“I’m not throwing anyone anywhere,” I snapped. “Look, if you don’t want to do this after all, fine, I’ll get someone else. Just tell me so.”

“I didn’t say that,” Aaron said evenly. “I like Beau. I’d be happy to go to dinner with him, even if his parents are there.”

My spine wilted a little, and I fell back against the seat. “Great. Thanks.”

“Now I guess you want to look at my closet.”

“Yes!” That was enough of a motivator to get me onto my feet. “It’s been months since you let me look through your things, I’m afraid your argyle might have killed off the last of your button downs. The polos are probably breeding out of control.”

“Polo shirts are perfectly appropriate for my work,” Aaron said indignantly, but there was a bit of a smile lurking there too. This was an old conversation between us, but never tired. “The company gives them out—they have the logo and everything. I can’t just throw them away.”

“Astonishingly, you can,” I confided, taking his arm and leading him back to his room. “But at the very least you can relegate them to their own closet where they don’t give the rest of the clothes bad ideas. Now.” I threw open the closet doors and grinned. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Two hours later I had Aaron acceptably clothed, we’d finished off the rest of the beers in his fridge, and I’d decided the best thing for me was to sleep the buzz off at his place. I could wake up early, hurry back to my place to shower and change, and still make it into work before eight-thirty.

That assumed that the alarm in my phone was set right, which it wasn’t. Instead of waking up at six-thirty, I was prodded awake by Aaron at ten after eight.

“Eric.”

“Mmph.” I batted at his hand. “What?”

“Shouldn’t you be up already?”

“What?” I groped for my phone on the floor, stared at it long enough to make out the numbers, then levitated off the couch with a yell. “Shit! I’m late, shit, shit.” I stared down at my rumpled clothes. “I can’t wear these into the office.”

“Borrow some of mine,” Aaron advised. “I have to get going, lock up on your way out, okay?”

“We aren’t remotely the same size!” I exclaimed. I had four inches on Aaron, and that was just in one-dimension.

“Polos are stretchy, you know,” he said with an evil grin. “Bye, Eric.”

“Don’t forget about tonight!” I called after him. The door shut on my admonishment, and I ran a hand through my hair and leapt into action.

I made it to work by eight-fifty-four, not showered but clean-shaven and dressed in a dark green polo shirt that I’d bought Aaron as a joke for his last birthday, which just barely looked decent on me. My pants were my own, that couldn’t be helped, and so I sat down as fast as I could and hoped the wrinkles weren’t too noticeable. As for my hair, well... I’d done the best I could with what I had, but Aaron’s gel wasn’t being too kind to me. I looked more like a mad scientist than someone with artfully tousled bedhead.

“Where have you been?” Lorna hissed at me from across the hall.

“Don’t ask,” I said darkly. “Where’s Beau?” His door was open but he wasn’t inside.

“Off to a meeting.”

I frowned. “It’s not even nine yet, why are they already meeting?” The senior partner meeting tended towards a later start time thanks to Papa Bowman’s disinclination to miss his morning water aerobics class.

“Mr. Radcliffe crashed his car last night.”

My headache, the dregs of the hangover from last night that the coffee wasn’t helping me kick, surged in my brain. “Oh no.” Glen Radcliffe was the acting CEO of one of our major corporate clients, taking the position after his wife suffered a stroke earlier in the year. Papa Bowman had fought hard to get him the position, since he didn’t have the technical expertise his wife did, but a shakeup would have spelled bad news for the green energy company still

finding its financial footing. He was being watched, though, and any erratic behavior on his part just gave his detractors more ammunition.

“He was drunk. Felix has gone to post his bail, but it’s all hands on deck trying to salvage the situation,” Lorna said. “He already has that DUI on his record, and now...”

“Now it’s really bad,” I agreed. “Did anyone get hurt?”

“No, thank God. But someone could have been. Beau’s been sent to corporate headquarters to meet with the VPs, he left fifteen minutes ago.”

“Damn.” What a rotten start to the day.

“He was surprised you weren’t in,” Lorna continued. “I think he’d been looking forward to seeing you.”

“Please don’t make me feel any worse right now,” I begged her. Surprisingly, she backed off.

Well. All I could do now was make sure the day didn’t live up to its epic suckage potential. I rescheduled all of Beau’s meetings, figuring he’d be gone for most of the day, and spent the rest of the morning answering phone calls, emails and generally doing damage control. The polo sleeves bit into my biceps, and the cotton felt itchy. Stupid bargain basement detergent, I’d always had to do my laundry separate from Aaron’s.

Lunch was sandwiches, ordered in by a compassionate Lorna. I got intermittent texts from Beau asking me to send along various files pertaining to Radcliffe, and I answered them as quickly as possible. That was the saving grace of my morning, the fact that I was still able to be useful. I didn’t even get to see Beau, and as the clock rolled on and the emergency didn’t go away, I started to get antsy. What if he couldn’t make the dinner tonight? Aaron would be put out, but there was no telling how his folks would take it.

At five ’o clock, I texted him.

Still on for dinner at 8?

A minute later, the reply came back:

I’ll be there. You?

No worries, I assured him. At least I wouldn’t have to call his mother and let her know he was cancelling.

“I’m off,” Lorna informed me. “I think the worst of it’s over now, and I’ve got to get home and prep things for tomorrow. You’re still coming, right?”

“Carrie’s birthday party, of course,” I said. I’d already had a present shipped to Beau’s house for him to bring after he hadn’t gotten back to me on the options I sent him. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Good.” She came over and ruffled her hand through my stiff hair. “Do yourself a favor, Eric. Go home and wash this out. It looks a little odd.”

“Sure thing,” I said, but after she left I just settled further back into my chair with a sigh. To be honest, I didn’t really want to go home, itchy shirt notwithstanding. Home meant being alone, meant acknowledging the fact that I was sitting by myself while Beau was on a date with Aaron and his parents. A date that I had masterminded and set up. A date that I desperately wished I was going on, despite the awkward circumstances. I didn’t want to go home, but I didn’t feel like going to a club either. No, I’d stay and work for a while. There was plenty for me to do.

By seven-forty-five, I had organized all the paperclips by color—we had a surprising number of blue ones, they almost rivaled silver for color dominance. I had reorganized my files, cleaned every flat surface I could find—wouldn’t the janitorial staff be surprised—and was now throwing Beau’s stress ball at the wall and trying to catch it on the rebound. I was three for thirty so far. Meh, I’d never been that great at sports, despite my size.

My phone beeped. I glanced at it—a text from Beau.

Where are you?

I frowned and typed:

At work. Why?

There was a significant pause, and then I read:

A cab is on its way for you.

Why?

Just take it.

Uh-oh, terse. And he was sending a cab for me... right now? Right before his dinner? This didn’t bode well. *What’s wrong?* I asked.

We’ll discuss it later.

Oh, crap.

Sure enough, a cab pulled up outside of the office building five minutes later. I walked out to the driver's window a little diffidently.

"You Eric Vollan?" the guy asked me.

"Yes."

"Good. Hop in."

I swallowed and got into the cab. "Where are we going?"

"Canlis."

Of course. Because whatever I'd done required Beau to chew me out in person before heading in to dinner. Crap.

Beau was waiting outside the restaurant at ten past eight, looking more than a little flustered. I couldn't see Aaron—maybe he'd gone inside already? I got out of the cab and winced when Beau did a double take at the sight of me. I could only imagine how bad I looked at this point, what with the way I'd been compulsively running my hands through my hair.

Beau paid the cabbie, then turned and looked at me. I wanted to sink into the pavement. "Hi?" I managed.

"I was surprised," Beau said at last, "to get here and see Aaron Goldman, of all people, waiting for me. When he told me what you'd worked out, I was genuinely shocked."

Shit. "You don't like him?" I asked, my heart sinking. If that was so, I'd put Aaron in an incredibly embarrassing situation.

Beau shook his head. "He's fine, but what shocked me was the fact that you somehow thought I'd want to see anyone other than *you* here tonight."

What. "What?"

"Obviously that's an assumption I shouldn't have made, but I swear I thought this lead-up was your way, convoluted as it was, of declaring yourself," Beau continued, sounding somewhere between frustrated and angry. "Not that you were going to foist me off onto one of your friends in an effort to keep me from—"

"No, no, there was no foisting!" I interjected. "Are you kidding me, no! I set you up with Aaron because I thought you guys would have a good time

together, and he was interested and he's, you know, closer to you in terms of education and professional success. I didn't set you up with him because I wasn't interested!" Well, there went that declaration, fantastic.

Beau shut his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, all of the anger and most of the frustration was gone from his face. What was left was the calm, matter-of-fact expression that got my engine revving instantly. "All right," he said. "Clearly we've got a lot to work out, not the least of which is your abysmal sense of personal self-worth, but first things first. My parents have been sitting in there by themselves for the past half hour, which isn't going to endear them to anyone, and you..." He looked at me and sighed, then took off his suit jacket. It was light and well-fitted, and just slightly broader than my own shoulders. "Wear this."

"Wait, you want to introduce me to your parents?"

"You're damn right, I do," Beau said, a little of his southern drawl coming through. "Now put it on."

I swung the jacket over my shoulders and fastened the single button. "This has to look so weird."

"Not any weirder than you without it."

"Hey—"

Beau moved in and cut off my indignant protest with a brief kiss, barely more than a brush of his lips against mine. To say it left me breathless would have been a gross understatement. My body felt like it was catching on fire from the mouth down, and Beau grinned. "Your face is almost the same color as your hair," he murmured. "Relax. You handle every other part of my life just fine, you can handle this."

"And you *want* me to," I reiterated, just to make sure. "Tonight and everything... associated with it. You want me."

"And nobody else," Beau said, and then squared his shoulders. "All right, let's get this pain in the ass over with."

The hostess was kind enough not to give me a second glance as she led us to the table, but the same couldn't be said for Mr. and Mrs. Lester Montgomery. "Pinned like a bug" might have been an appropriate description, or "being set on fire by a magnifying glass on a hot summer day." Either way, Beau's father's frown deepened, and his mother, if she could have moved her face,

would undoubtedly have been scowling. Beau kissed his mother's cheek, we sat and before any introductions could be made, she was off and running.

"Well." The Arctic was probably warmer than Mrs. Montgomery's voice. "I must say, this time you've outdone yourself, Beaudan. It isn't enough that you break my heart anew every year, you aren't even trying to pretend to be with someone any longer, are you?" Her tone turned a little tremulous, like she adjusted a dial in her throat. "All I ever wanted was for you to be happy, to do your duty to your family and continue the Montgomery name, and all you can do is throw my hopes and dreams back in my face!"

"Mother—"

"No, no, don't try to excuse your role in this sad situation. How dare you bring such a person here to dinner with us tonight? Do you delight in mocking me?"

"*Mother—*"

"I honestly think sometimes it would be better if we just never saw each other at all!"

"Mrs. Montgomery," I tried, but she wouldn't even look at me. So I went with something more drastic. I took Beau's hand in mine, brought it to my lips and kissed it. Then I set our joined hands on the table, and looked her straight in her widened eyes. "This isn't a trick," I said gently. "I promise. I've just had a very rough day, plus car trouble," in that I hadn't gotten to drive my own car here, "and the only thing that's kept me going has been the thought of meeting Beau's family tonight." Also not a lie, even if it hadn't been *me* that I'd been thinking about them meeting. "I sincerely apologize for my appearance, but I didn't want to make you wait any longer than absolutely necessary in order to go home and change." I reached my free hand across the table. "I'm Eric Vollan."

"Oh." A bit nonplussed, she allowed me to touch her fingertips, and then I shook Mr. Montgomery's hand. His grip was too hard, but I had the feeling that was more out of habit than extreme distaste. At least, I hoped so.

"Well." We paused long enough for Beau to order wine and starters—apparently, he knew what his parents liked—and then Mrs. Montgomery came back to me. "How long have you and my son known each other?"

"A little over two years," I said, still not letting go of Beau's hand. His thumb stroked softly across my knuckles, and I had to force myself not to dwell on it. "We met at work."

“Naturally,” his mother sighed. “He works far too much.”

“The price of success,” I agreed with a smile. “He’s the best lawyer the firm has, they keep him busy.”

“Eric,” Beau began, but I cut him off.

“Don’t even try to tell me you’re not, who’s the one they send out to do damage control when everyone else is running around like chickens with their heads cut off? You.”

“You should take more credit for your successes,” his father added. He had a deep voice, a lot like Beau’s, but much rougher. It was the first thing he’d said all night.

“And what is it that you do at the firm, Eric?” his mother asked.

“I’m a personal assistant.”

“Executive assistant,” Beau corrected. “He works directly for Peter Bowman, who owns the firm.”

Oh I do, do I? I looked sidelong at Beau and he smiled at me, daring me to change the story.

“Not a lawyer,” his father grouched, but his mother fluttered her hand at her husband dismissively.

“Oh, Lester, not everyone has to be a banker or a lawyer,” she said. Both her husband and her son’s eyes widened with shock. I smiled. I was in now.

Over the course of dinner and two bottles of wine, I was grilled on everything from my family history, to my interactions with Beau, to my feelings about children. Beau grimaced but I jumped on that one, all ready with my phone to pull up a picture of Carrie. “She’s precious, isn’t she?” I asked, completely rhetorically because that much preciousness had to be obvious to everyone. “Her mother is a friend of ours—we’re going to her birthday party tomorrow.”

“Oh, damn,” Beau said suddenly. “I forgot to buy a present.”

“I did it for you, it should have been dropped off at your house by FedEx today, and it’s from both of us,” I informed him. “You’re welcome.”

“Well,” his mother—or Elizabeth, as she’d invited me to call her—said a moment later. “I have to admit I had my doubts, but there’s no way you could

possibly pretend all of this. For the first time in more years than I care to count, I feel like I have a sliver of hope in my soul again.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Lizzie,” her husband said.

“It’s not drama!” she insisted. “It’s honesty! You might not be the sort of partner I always envisioned for my son,” she told me, “but you love him, and you’ve got a good heart. That has to count for something.”

“It certainly does,” Beau said dryly. “Mother, it’s getting late. Don’t you have a meeting with the garden society in the morning?”

“Yes, I suppose I do. It’s been lovely to meet you, Eric.” She extended her hand to me and smiled, and for the first time that night, I was able to see the resemblance between her fine, frozen features and Beau.

“You as well,” I replied. “I look forward to seeing you again, Elizabeth.”

Lester didn’t say anything, but he did pay for the meal on their way out, which was nice considering it had to cost in the several hundreds of dollars range. I sat back in my chair, bolted what was left in my wine glass, and then looked at Beau.

“Holy shit.”

“You’re telling me,” he said. “That’s the best dinner I’ve had with them in years. Imagine that, but without the effort to make conversation with you and a lot more expounding on my faults.”

“Your parents have some screwed-up priorities.” A little cautiously, I reached out and took his hand again. Beau twined our fingers together, making me smile. “So, I’m working for Papa Bowman now?”

“If we want to be able to have an open relationship, yes,” Beau said. He looked at me, and I could see heat and hunger in his bright eyes. “Which I certainly want. Two *years* you’ve been working with me, and I thought you might feel something, but I couldn’t take the first step. Not given my position as your boss.”

“I never wanted to be one of those... clichés,” I admitted. “Office worker falls for powerful, handsome boss, cue whips and chains and gold digger status.”

“No one would ever accuse you of being a gold digger,” Beau told me. “Not with your frustrating inability to accept gifts.”

“I told you, the Super Bowl tickets were just a bribe—”

“And correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t think whips and chains are really your thing,” Beau continued. His eyes smoldered, and I felt my heart jump in my chest. “Are they?”

“N-Not really,” I managed. “I mean, I can be convinced, but honestly I’ve mostly thought about...”

“What?” Beau asked. He lifted our joined hands to his mouth and pressed his lips to the soft underside of my wrist, just grazing the skin with his teeth.

“Desk,” I whispered. “Your office, your desk. I see you sitting there all the time and it just—it’s dumb, but it gets me going. That and when you tell me what to do, and when you wear your glasses, and I’m just going to shut up now before I freak you out any more.”

“You’d have to try a lot harder to freak me out,” Beau promised me. “That said, there’s no way we’re getting into anything at the office. Fraternalization aside, I don’t need those sorts of associations with the place I work, it would be too distracting.” He stood up and pulled me with him. “I do have a home office, however.”

“You want to take me home?”

“It’s a first step,” Beau said. We left the restaurant and walked over to where his car was parked. The gunmetal blue BMW coupe was an older model, no distracting new car smell, and I’d ridden in it a few times before. There was really no reason for it to work on me like an aphrodisiac, but from the second my butt hit the leather seat and Beau closed the door behind me, I was hard. It was as if all the tensions over the past few days, capped by tonight’s surprisingly successful dinner, had fallen away and left me weightless and carefree.

Beau looked over at me as he started the car and laughed. “You look way too happy.”

“There’s no such thing,” I said, scooting the seat back so I could stretch out my long legs. That put my lap on prominent display, and it was gratifying to see his gaze linger there for longer than it should have.

“Eyes on the road,” I reminded him as I rubbed the heel of my hand against my crotch. Oh man, that felt good. I wondered how Beau felt about getting a show.

“No.”

“Hmm? No what?” I’d barely fondled the zipper yet.

“No, you don’t get to touch yourself in my car.”

“Why not?” It wasn’t a whine, it wasn’t. My voice was too deep to whine. It was more of a... whoan. Or something. I couldn’t think.

“Three reasons. One, I don’t want to get into an accident trying to keep my eyes on you. Two, if I got into an accident, or if we were pulled over for indecent exposure, the mood killing would be the least of our problems. Three,” and here it was, the tone I loved, that I could barely wait for even though I knew I wasn’t going to like what he had to say, “for the rest of the night, that’s mine. Don’t touch it.”

Fuck. “Or what?” I asked thickly.

“Or else I’m not going to fuck you over my desk tonight, that’s what.”

My hands couldn’t have flown off my lap faster than if they’d had wings. “Got it. No touching.” Even though I ached, even though I honestly could have wiggled my hips the wrong way and gotten a little more delectable pressure, thus following the letter of the law but not the spirit. Everything in me, from the way my heart pounded, to the surge of blood through my veins that left my ears feeling a little fuzzy, hammered home that I wanted to do this Beau’s way.

“Perfect,” Beau said. He sounded a little hoarse, and a furtive look told me that I wasn’t alone in feeling restricted right now. Then I realized I didn’t have to be furtive, and looked openly. “We’re very close to my house,” he added after a moment, squirming a little in his seat. I licked my lips and grinned at him.

“That’s good. How do you feel about blowjobs in cars that aren’t moving?”

“Christ Almighty,” Beau swore. For most people it wouldn’t have been swearing, but I knew him better than that, and he didn’t tend to invoke the Lord lightly. I smirked and settled back into my seat.

“Is that a yes?”

“No,” he replied, and then a beat later said, “At least, not tonight.”

Right, because tonight, desk, fucking... all very good things, but despite my height I was pretty flexible, and I was sure if I twisted the right way I could—
“Not both?”

“I’m over forty,” Beau said. “Like it or not, that does entail some limitations.”

“I bet we could get around them.”

“Later, Eric.”

“There’s Viagra, there’s tantric sex—my mom could write a book about tantric sex, and oh, shit.” I covered my face with my hand and groaned. “I can’t fucking believe I just brought my mom into this conversation. Talk about killing the mood.” Sure enough, my cock started to soften under the pervasive image of my mother and *any* kind of sex. “Damn it.”

“I’m sure we can get it back,” Beau said. “Once the car is parked.”

Sure enough, we barely made it through the front door before Beau had me pressed against the wall, one hand gripping the back of my neck while the other one framed my face, holding me steady as we kissed. Kissed, sucked face, devoured each other—kissing was a sweet word, but it didn’t really encompass the urgency in our movements, the way I couldn’t keep my hands from spanning his back, broad and warm and strong, so strong. I didn’t get together with a lot of guys who were bigger than me, but Beau was. He held me firm, rocked against me like he couldn’t stand not to be touching me with every part of his body, and I knew that this was the closest I’d ever come to absolute bliss.

And we weren’t even out of our clothes yet.

“Office,” I said between deep, sucking kisses on his collarbone. I knew I couldn’t leave hickeys above the collar, but below seemed to be fair game. “Where’s it?”

“First door on the left,” he said distractedly. “Across from the bathroom.”

“I want to go to there.” Beau raised his head and looked at me blankly. “No? Seriously? Tina Fey, ‘30 Rock,’ nothing?”

“You can educate me on popular culture later this weekend,” Beau said with a frustrated little growl. “If,” he added a bit more cautiously, “you want to stay.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

Beau rolled his eyes. “I’m feelin’ you up in my foyer, talking about having sex with you in my office after both of us endured a dinner with my parents, Eric. I don’t think any of that points to something other than serious for us. I want you to stay. Rihanna,” he added before I could say anything.

“You’re so incredible, I can barely stand you sometimes,” I told him honestly. “Let’s go to your office.”

Actually, first we stopped by the bedroom for supplies and almost, *almost* got waylaid by the bed. It was a big bed, way too big for one person, and it looked lonely there by itself in the middle of the room. Lonely and soft, like we could sink into it, like I could just be surrounded by covers and Beau and die happy. *Later*, I promised it, *we’ll despoil you properly*.

We hit another little snag once we got to the office, although “snag” didn’t really carry the right connotations. More like “big sexy jealous fit,” and I loved it.

His desk here was even nicer than the one at work, obviously an antique, made of mahogany and with an embossed leather inlay. It was uncluttered, just the way Beau liked his things to be. I wondered if it would hold my weight, but Beau didn’t seem to have any doubts as he lifted me up—actually lifted me—and set me down on it. He helped me out of his jacket and then got started on the polo. “Where’n God’s name did you get this thing?” he murmured as his lips traced the line of my jaw.

“Mmm... from Aaron.”

Beau pulled back to glare at me. “Why’re you wearing Aaron’s clothes?”

“Do you know your accent gets thicker when you’re turned on?”

“*Eric.*”

“I went over to his apartment last night,” I said, slowly undoing Beau’s tie as I talked. “To get him ready for you.” I unbuttoned his shirt, slowly, taking my time to look and touch. His chest hair was the same silver color that I loved, crinkled and gorgeous, and his nipples were just begging to be played with. “Because otherwise he would have shown up tonight looking like me, and,” I chuckled, “I didn’t want that for you.” I kissed his collarbone and the divot at the base of his throat as I pulled his shirt out of his pants. “I drank too many beers, slept on his couch, missed my alarm and had to borrow something of his for work. That polo was the closest to fitting.” I brushed my fingers across his bare stomach, and then trailed them down to his belt buckle. “And then you got a fashion disaster anyway, because you somehow ended up with me.” I glanced up at him, a little nervous. “What happened with Aaron?”

“He showed up,” Beau said, pressing our bare chests together. He was so warm, it made me sigh. “We talked for a few minutes. Figured out what was

going on, I thanked him for his time, he told me there were no hard feelings, and then I texted you. I didn't want it to be anyone but you with me tonight." He slipped his hand inside my pants and gripped my cock through my boxers, making me bite my lip to keep from whimpering. "I just want you."

"Me too. You. Me too, for you... oh, *fuck!*" In one smooth motion, Beau had jerked me forward and pulled my pants down past my hips, and now he was getting down on his knees and oh my God, this sort of thing just didn't happen to me, there was no way Beau Montgomery was about to suck my cock, because my life had never been so—

His lips closed around me. I shut my eyes and held onto the desk with both hands, gripped it hard enough to bite into my skin, anything to keep me from coming right then and there. Then I had to open my eyes, because there was no way I wanted to miss watching this. He wrapped one hand around the base of my cock, the other one teasing between my legs as he slid his mouth down my shaft, his tongue pressing and licking. When he pulled off with a faint *pop*, I was almost relieved, because I was really close.

"Lube," he said, holding out a hand. I dazedly looked around for the bottle he'd brought in, handed it to him and watched with fascination as he slicked up his fingers. Usually I liked to prep myself, I knew what I could take and it was just easier, but Beau was special. I wanted him in me, any part of him I could get, and his hands... I'd spent hours staring at his hands. Days, probably, over the total length of our relationship. They were gorgeous, and I wanted them.

The first finger entered me, and oh, it was perfect. Not too slow and hesitant, like some blushing virgin who didn't know what he was getting into, and not fast and furious either, like someone getting right down to business. He fucked me smoothly, stretching me, spreading the lube and teasing my prostate and sucking my cock all at once. This time, I did have to keep my eyes shut because I was so close I could feel my body fighting to break free and orgasm. *No, I insisted, not yet. Not yet not yetnotyetnotnotnot...*

"Please," I begged, at some point, it could have been seconds; it could have been half an hour later. "Please, Beau, I need to come."

"Not until I'm in you," he said. His voice was a gravelly husk, raw from taking my cock, raw with want. He pulled his fingers out—fingers? When had they multiplied?—and let go of me, and I almost screamed with frustrated desire.

“Don’t touch it,” Beau warned me as my hand twitched downward. “That’s mine, remember? I’ll take care of it.” He grabbed a condom and held it out to me. “You can touch mine, though.”

“Oh, thank God.” I went to drop down, but he stopped me. “If you fuck me right now, I’m not going to last long,” I warned him.

“You think I am?”

“And I really, really want to give you a blowjob.” Did I ever want to, holy shit. Beau’s cock was about as long as mine, but it was thicker, rigid and hard, and I wanted it in my mouth so badly I was salivating.

“Later,” he promised me. “Later, Eric.” And later would have to do.

He felt like velvet under my fingertips, warm and smooth. I stroked him a few times, then a few more times, and then he growled and took the condom back, tore it open, and rolled it on himself. He turned me around, pressed my body down until my chest was flush with the leather, then leaned over me. His cock was right there, *right there*, and I tried to squirm back, but he held me still with his weight. Beau kissed the base of my skull, then the back of my neck, a moment of tenderness that I hadn’t expected. “You ready?” he asked me.

“Yeah,” I said, all my smart-assery gone as I contemplated the fact that the man I’d been hopelessly in love with for the past two years was about to fulfill one of my most enduring fantasies. “I’m ready.”

He pressed into my body, and we made the same desperate noise as he slid home. I felt so full, and my ass throbbed a bit as I adjusted to his size, but my cock was resolutely hard. He held still until my breathing evened out, then started to move. Slow at first, then quicker, harder. Beau was careful to hold my hips steady so my erection didn’t bang into the wooden drawer in front of it, but he pummeled me despite that. I fucking loved every moment of it, every pull, every thrust. I clawed onto the far side of the desk and held there, saying God knows what stupid, porny things, as I got closer and closer to the edge. I wasn’t going to last, I couldn’t, even without being able to touch myself, I couldn’t, and I must have been begging because then Beau’s hand was there, closing around me, jerking me in time with the movement of his cock inside of me, and—

That was it. Done. Fucked so good I saw the white light, an orgasm so hard that I trembled like a colt as it washed through me. Beau came as well, slamming in deep and staying there, groaning in my ear, holding me, kissing

me and touching me. He stayed inside of me as the swell receded, stayed on top of me, both of us slick with sweat. We laid there for a few minutes, just catching our breath and basking in the afterglow, before I remembered that I was on a desk, and it was kind of hard.

“Bed?” I asked weakly.

Beau laughed quietly and pulled back. “Bed,” he agreed.

His bed was just as soft as I’d imagined, just as cozy and welcoming. Stress and sex made me sleepy, and we barely had time to do more than wipe ourselves off and lay down before we fell asleep. I woke up once in the middle of the night, the kind of shocked, jerky awakening that you only got in unfamiliar surroundings. *Where was I again? Who had I...?*

“Mmm, Eric.” Beau slung his arm around my waist and stroked my hip. “Relax.”

“Sorry,” I said sheepishly, turning to face him. “I forgot where I was for a second.”

“S fine, I understand,” he said. Even in the darkness, I could see his grin. “I can remind you, if you like.”

My cock woke up right along with the rest of me. “Uh, yeah. That’d be great.”

Round Two was less intense, but much sweeter. It also came with a shower, which we both needed by that point. I slept better after that, and in the morning, we got dressed—Beau’s clothes fit me much better—and ate cold pizza at his kitchen bar for breakfast.

I was definitely in love.

Not even Lorna’s extremely loud, excessively triumphant “I *knew* it!” when we arrived at Carrie’s birthday party could diminish my good mood. Of course, it didn’t hurt that I’d ordered Carrie a light-up, song-playing, bubble-blowing princess wand for her birthday. Her parents could look forward to listening to those tunes for months, which was probably about as long as it would take Lorna to stop crowing.

There were logistics to figure out, roles to be established, and hurdles to overcome. As happy as I was with how things had turned out, I knew that in some ways, we didn’t have an easy path ahead of us.

“Here,” Beau said suddenly, jolting me out of my reverie. “Eat this.” He pushed a bite of chocolate cake into my mouth, and I smiled even as my eyes rolled back in my head, because damn that was delicious.

I had Beau. He had me. We’d figure out the rest.

The End

Author Bio

Cari Z. is a Colorado girl who loves snow and sunshine. She's been published with Dreamspinner, Less Than Three and Storm Moon Press among others, but her stories for the Goodreads M/M group events have been some of her favorite writing projects. This is her third year picking up a prompt, and it just gets more fun each time. Cari hopes that you enjoy reading what she's put out there as much as she enjoyed writing it in the first place. Follow her blog, Twitter or Facebook for info on upcoming projects and recent works.

Contact & Media Info

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MAN OF THE MATCH

By Lane Swift

Photo Description

An athletic, tanned young man, wearing only boxers, sits on a sofa; his left hand is resting on a football. A second man, in a T-shirt, is kneeling down on the floor to one side of the first. His head rests on the first man's thigh, facing his erection, which he regards, as he holds it upright through the opening of the boxers. The moment appears tender and intimate.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“Since that moment we figured out we were alike in more ways than the other boys in the locker room would ever know, we were inseparable. We even shared most of our ‘firsts’ together. But as it sometimes does, life pushed us in different directions after high school. Grad school will be hectic enough, but his appearance back into my life just might change my plans!”

These two guys look to have just finished playing/watching a ‘rousing’ game of football. They may have had to overcome a few obstacles to get to their current point of intimacy, but of course it was worth it for these two.

—I would love for this scene to appear at some point in the story. A bit of hurt-comfort would be nice but no extreme violence, BDSM, or cheating. I do not believe that this needs any paranormal elements either. If they have miscommunication please let it be short and easily straightened out. I would like to require it to have a HEA, and I am not against epilogues with time jumps to the future.

Thanks,

Ale

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: high school, college, barely legal, first time, coming-of-age, sports

Word Count: 20,093

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Ale, what a lovely prompt this was to work with. Thank you for allowing me to set the story in the UK and to change the sport from American football to rugby. (No prior knowledge of the sport is required!)

MAN OF THE MATCH

By Lane Swift

Chapter 1

After a season of change, Laurence entered Year 10 with a place amongst the league of men. He had half a chin of stubble and the timbre of a tenor to prove it.

But his summer spurt wasn't restricted to his body. He'd been moved up a set for maths, which was why he was currently stood behind two dozen other fourteen-year-old blazered boys outside Room 43, jostling to see the seating plan that was pinned to the notice board. Laurence hung back. This was the top set, after all. Surely any and every seat was a good seat?

Except, perhaps, the one second row from the back, by the window, next to the inimitable Aaron Ford?

Laurence's only glimmer of hope, as the register was closed and the space beside him remained vacant, was that Aaron—

The classroom door swung open midway through the distribution of text and exercise books. Mr Hall didn't turn round from where he was writing on the board. "Nice of you to join us, Mr Ford."

"Miss me over the summer, did you, sir?"

"No, I can't say I did." Mr Hall glanced over his shoulder. "Tuck your shirt in. There's a good lad."

No arguments, Aaron thrust his shirt into his trousers as he crossed the room to take his seat.

Aaron Ford was one of those boys who'd started puberty before he left junior school. Already six feet tall, muscular and quick, he navigated the corridors of King's School for Boys like a great white shark. When Aaron was on the move, most people, including the teachers, had the good sense to step out of his way.

His pecs strained the buttonholes of his shirt as he leaned back in his seat, knees wide apart, hands laced behind his head. He took up twice as much space as was necessary for someone his size, which was four times the space occupied by the average boy.

Laurence tried to wiggle his seat a fraction to the left without drawing undue attention.

“All right?” Aaron said, grinning, taking a biro out of his blazer pocket. His smile was wicked, like he was getting ready to do something he shouldn't. But it was also strangely infectious.

“Yes. Thanks.”

Laurence straightened his pencil box, which contained his Parker pen, his mechanical pencil, compass and protractor.

Mr Hall didn't waste time on the usual introductions. He launched into a recap of Venn diagrams and set notation. As shaded circles and unfamiliar symbols covered the whiteboard, Laurence's heart sank. He'd only just earned his place amongst the elite and already it looked like he might be on his way to losing it.

“Aren't you going to write anything down?” Laurence whispered to Aaron, as he frantically scribbled.

Aaron was doodling on the inside cover of his exercise book. “Nah. I've got this. I think I'll get straight on with the questions.”

Sprawled across the desk, his head propped on his right arm, Aaron flicked open the text book. While Laurence sweated over the first problems, Aaron appeared to be breezing along. He bit his bottom lip as he worked, his left hand scrawling messily over his page, oblivious to Laurence's snail-like progress.

After Aaron turned the page to the second section—*already*—he reached into his blazer pocket and pulled out a packet of Polo mints.

“Want one?” he said, nudging Laurence's leg with his massive thigh.

“No, thanks.”

Aaron shrugged and popped a mint into his mouth. He didn't crunch. He sucked, slowly and silently, his jaw working up and down, his cheeks sucking in and out. When the Polo mint was down to nothing but a tiny, thin white ring, Aaron poked it out on the tip of his tongue. Then, he moved it about from side to side, then sucked it back in again, leaving the faint, alluring scent of sugar and menthol in its wake.

A lot of boys wanted to be like Aaron. It was obvious from the way they acted around him: laughing louder than usual, flexing non-existent muscle, vying for his attention.

If Laurence had any envy, it was only for Aaron's ease with mathematics, not his hulking, heat-radiating body, his chocolate brown eyes or his thick, dark

hair. Those features were, however, undeniably, disconcertingly blocking Laurence's line of sight.

"You all right?" Aaron said.

"Yes. Why wouldn't I be?"

"You look stuck."

"I didn't do this work last year. I was in Set Two."

"It's easy, once you get the hang of it."

Without waiting to be asked, Aaron crowded further into Laurence's space, so that the scent of mint was replaced with the smell of *him*, his warm breath gusting over Laurence's cheek. Laurence blushed. The burn spread to the tips of his ears.

"Don't worry, I'll help you," Aaron said.

They may as well have been in the room alone. The quiet hum of studious boys in the background, the unobtrusive movement of Mr Hall pacing the rows faded to nothing as Aaron quietly explained the mechanics of intersection and overlap.

Initially, Aaron's size and ebullience had worried Laurence, but one lesson in his company and he was charmed.

If he'd had the guts to admit it, he might have called it a crush.

Four times a week, Laurence sat next to Aaron, watching in dismay as this carefree boy consistently outperformed him. Laurence didn't begrudge Aaron his success. How could he when he liked him so much? Nonetheless, he wished the secrets of the quadratic equation would occasionally reveal themselves to him as they did so frequently and easily to Aaron.

Laurence sometimes wondered if Aaron had similar success with girls; if everything he tried came to him as easily. He kept those sorts of thoughts to himself, though. Mostly they talked about school and sport. Every week, for PE, the choice was indoor or outdoor games. Aaron had tried for the last three months to coax Laurence away from the gym and onto the rugby pitch.

"Come on, Laurie. Just for this week," he pleaded, digging his elbow into Laurence's ribs, not enough to hurt but amply enough to be distracting. "Why don't you ever pick rugby?"

“Because I prefer gym. That’s what I’m good at. Why don’t you ever pick gym?”

“Because I like rugby.”

Between equations, they went over the same ground again and again. Aaron was persistent. “I’ve seen you run. You won the 200 metres on sports day, didn’t you? You’d be great on the back line. You should try out for the school team.”

As far as Laurence was aware, rugby during PE was little more than sanctioned brawling. Playing for the school team might be marginally more civilised, but the Dynamic Theatre Christmas Production was a stressful three weeks away. Laurence didn’t have the time.

He wouldn’t have minded seeing Aaron, though, pushing through the mud and belting up the pitch. But that was a bit gay, wasn’t it, only being interested in watching your mate play? And the last thing Laurence wanted was to be accused of being gay. Even if it was true.

Laurence hadn’t told anyone. Not his parents, not his three older sisters, and he trusted them the most. He’d definitely never tell anyone at school. Not because he was ashamed or because he wasn’t sure. He just wasn’t ready to fend off the inevitable stares and whispers, or possibly worse.

“Laurie.” Another jab in the ribs. “What did you get for question eighteen?”

“x equals four, y equals seven. You?”

“Same. See? You’re catching up.”

Aaron patted his protégé on the head.

Laurence didn’t know if it was because of the rugby—all that grappling of sweaty boys marinated in testosterone—that Aaron had absolutely no concept of personal space. Every opportunity to prod, poke, tickle or nuzzle up to Laurence, he took it.

“Enough, all right?” Laurence’s irritation was half-hearted at best. (Okay, he quite liked it, but he didn’t want to appear to like it *too* much.) He batted Aaron’s hand away from his head, laughing. “Aaron! Get off!”

“It’s really soft. Like a puppy. And so curly.” Undeterred, Aaron grasped for Laurence’s wrist instead and brought it to his head. “Go on, feel mine. It’s like a Brillo pad.”

“A Brillo pad? What’s that?”

“*What’s that?*” Aaron’s jaw dropped. He looked appalled, in a fond, amused sort of way. “It’s the green scratchy side of a washing up sponge.”

“We have a dishwasher at home.”

Laurence cringed at how dreadfully spoilt that made him sound. He didn’t get the chance to add that Aaron’s cropped hair wasn’t scratchy, even as Aaron was nudging him, laughing and teasing, “Course you do. That’s why you won’t play rugby. You don’t want to get *dirty*.”

Dirt wasn’t the problem; it was the getting clean afterwards that had Laurence flustered and flushing. He couldn’t look at Aaron. Visions of his friend clad in nothing but steam rendered him speechless.

It was just as well that before things could get any more awkward, their conversation was halted by Mr Hall calling the class to attention.

Like many younger siblings, for practicality’s sake, most of Laurence’s childhood had been spent following along with his sisters’ choices of extracurricular activities. In their case, it had been gymnastics and theatre. Laurence hadn’t minded before. Now though, a different something (*someone*) piqued his interest.

In the privacy of his bedroom, Laurence watched rugby clips on YouTube and fantasised it was Aaron hunkered down with the ball, not some muscled stranger. He bought a rugby magazine and spent long minutes gazing at pictures of Douglas Reynaud, the French full back with the come-to-bed eyes.

November, Laurence quit gymnastics and started running round the block of an evening instead. Then, after their final performance on Christmas Eve, he left the Dynamic Theatre Group.

“I wondered how long it would be, before you gave up,” his Mum said, not looking up from peeling carrots. “I know your heart wasn’t in the Christmas play this year, and you’ve got more school work now but it would be a shame not to have some extracurricular activity.”

“There are clubs after school. I thought I’d try some of those.”

“All right.” She put down the knife, turned to look at him with her head tilted to one side. “This isn’t because your Dad was complaining about your sisters’ university fees? Because you know it was all bluster?”

“Yes, I know.”

She was appeased. Laurence's secret crush was safe. Not that his parents' financial concerns didn't cross his mind. When they'd had the first two of their four children, university tuition was still free. By the time Lisa trundled off to Manchester, tuition fees were £3000 a year, and if the government had their way, they were set to keep rising. Louise would be going next, in the following September, and in the years to come Leanne and Laurence himself would be on their way, too.

Their financial situation was comfortable, unlike Aaron's, whose Mum worked as a hairdresser and had to support the two of them alone. But it would be slightly more comfortable without the cost of Laurence's gymnastics and theatre fees. Of course, that consideration hadn't been on his mind at all when he decided to quit. Even if now it eased the sense of discomfort that he was quitting because of a boy.

On the first day back at school in January, Laurence sought out Aaron amongst the bike shed loiterers.

“Laurie!” Aaron threw his arms wide. “Come for a smoke?”

Laurence didn't smoke, nor did Aaron, though Aaron did own a bike. He liked to make a point of letting everyone know which one was his. And what the consequences would be if anyone tampered with it. Now that Laurence knew him better, he realised this was more to do with the effort it would have taken for Aaron's Mum to make such a purchase, rather than Aaron showing off his brawn.

“No,” Laurence said. “I came looking for you. I was thinking, over Christmas, I might like to have a go at rugby.”

“Seriously, man?” Aaron's face lit up like Father Christmas had visited a second time—and Laurence's face flushed with a rush of heat.

“Yes. But I've never played. I've hardly even played football.”

No hesitation, Aaron replied, “You're a gymnast. You're fast, you've got good balance.”

Laurence shivered with fluttery pride that spread warmth to his fingertips. When Aaron slung his arm around his shoulders, and left it there even as they began to walk, Laurence felt like his feet weren't touching the ground.

As the two of them sloped away from the motley group of tobacco users, Aaron didn't stop talking. With great and infectious enthusiasm, he went

through almost the entire team list, checking which boys Laurence already knew, telling him which positions they played, until the bell went and a sea of boys swept them off in their different directions.

Still, a channel between Aaron and Laurence had opened, and from then on they were rarely more than a text or a lesson away from each other.

The following week, on a bitter, bone-numbing Wednesday afternoon, Laurence took his place as a supporter beneath one of a row of giant oaks that separated the King's School for Boys' playing field from King's School for Girls'.

King's were playing the Catholic school, Our Lady, from down the road. Aaron was wearing the number three shirt: a forward position, tight head, front row. He waved to Laurence on his way onto the pitch, but it looked far from friendly. The grin pulled his face into a tight grimace over his gum shield. The whole look was made more ferocious by the thick black tape that circled his head, holding down his ears. If Laurence hadn't known him, he'd have been intimidated.

Laurence recognised most of the other boys, too. Encouragingly, not all of them were bigger than him; particularly the ones on the back line. If that was where Laurence ended up playing, if he ended up playing, at least he wouldn't be outsized. One thing all the other boys shared though, as they spread out for the kick off, was their stance, the aggressive set of their shoulders. Laurence wasn't so sure about how well he would fare with that.

The ref's whistle blew. Keeping his eyes fixed on the ball, he tried to give the game his full attention, which fortuitously also meant getting plenty of time to eyeball Aaron. With his height and strength advantage, the moment Aaron got the ball he didn't let it go. Our Lady's burly forwards were no match for his speed, the backs were no match for his size. Aaron was a machine!

By the time the second half was coming to an end, King's were forty points up. The backs looked knackered and frozen. They were covered in wet mud, and the Our Lady wing closest to Laurence was shivering from his head to his feet. He couldn't possibly have been expecting to get the ball again, let alone get a run out at this late stage. Which was exactly what happened.

After a kick rolled off pitch and Our Lady threw the ball in from the side, it went over the heads of all the forwards and straight towards one of their back line players. Stumbling at first, he picked up the ball and started running. To

reach their try line and score, he had to cover seventy metres, nearly three-quarters of the pitch. Instead, as the opposition ploughed towards him, he passed to the wing!

The people spectating on the touchline started shouting at the scrawny runt to *kick it, chip and chase*. Either he didn't hear them, or he didn't know how to do it, or, for better or worse, he was determined to make the run.

He was fast; his skinny legs pistoned. When he was faced with his opposite number, he deftly side-stepped, and after that, he had a clear run for the last fifty. He looked surprised, that he'd got past everyone. Laurence watched his eyes widen as he flicked his head about to see if anyone was on his tail. The try was going to be his. It was really happening and Laurence could feel his excitement, he shared in it, no matter that the boy was playing for the opposition.

The exalted moment was short-lived, because from across the other side of the pitch, the King's fly half, a boy called Saul, and Aaron, were belting over the slippery mud and grass, after Our Lady's wing like the boy was carrying a stolen baby.

The wing mustn't have seen them. He was angling his run towards the posts, even as the coach was screaming, "No! *Run straight.*"

The boy didn't hear.

Laurence wasn't sure he could look. It was going to be carnage. He put his hands up to his face and peeked through his fingers. Aaron and Saul were closing in with ten more metres to go. Saul launched off the ground for the tackle, but the little winger kicked up, and, as if his feet had sprouted wings, he surged forward. Saul landed flat on his belly without making contact.

The winger was electrified and too fast for Aaron to get close enough to tackle. Diving through the air, arms out forward, ball held in both hands, he flew, and landed the ball over the try-line, right between the posts, with half a minute left to the final whistle.

Our Lady converted the try, to make the final score 43-10. But the try wasn't the only thing converted.

Laurence had never seen or felt anything like it. His decision was made before the fulltime whistle blew. It was made before Aaron was tearing off his tape and spitting out his gum shield, back to his old insouciant self, jogging over to Laurence and saying, "What do you think?"

“I think I’d better get some studs.”

Aaron had a scratch on the side of his face, and his shirt was ripped down his left shoulder. Neither stopped him bouncing up on his toes, throwing his arms wide and slapping Laurence heartily on his arm. “That’s brilliant! I’m going to tell the others!”

Aaron jogged off the field with the rest of his teammates, leaving Laurence with a muddy hand print on his coat and a cold space in his chest only one thing (*person*) could fill.

Chapter 2

Like all new things, the practice was harder than the theory.

For the remainder of the season, Laurence played two matches on the back line and the rest standing on the touchline as reserve for King's. In Aaron's expert opinion, this was an oversight on the part of the PE staff that would be to their detriment. Or in his words, "Fuck 'em. I'm taking you to Hartnell."

Aaron should have gone to Hartnell Rugby Football Club without Laurence. He was the one with the talent. But it was pointless arguing with him.

The U16's practiced on a Sunday. On a dull morning in March, Aaron and Laurence took to the field, joining twenty or so other boys in running drills and one-on-one tackling.

At fifteen, both were relative latecomers to the town side. Most of the other boys at Hartnell had been playing since they were minis, under twelve, and some since they were seven or eight. Martin, the coach, made it clear from the onset they would get no concession. Hartnell fielded a league-winning team and while everyone was welcome to the practice sessions, and everyone would get a chance to play in the friendlies, not everyone got to play the league.

After the drills, the boys were split into two teams, twelve a side, for a short game. To Laurence's dismay, Aaron was placed on the opposing wing, while he stood almost opposite at outside centre.

The game progressed slowly. A lot of care was placed on positioning the boys correctly in the scrum, making sure their legs were angled so that they didn't fall over when their heads locked. Collapsing the scrum was, above all things except tackling around the neck, strictly forbidden.

Coach Martin paid close attention to the ball as the scrum half threw in. He shouted instructions and encouragement. "Stay on your feet, lads. That's it, Henry, scoop it back with your foot."

The ball never seemed to come to Laurence. The moment it left the scrum, it only went down the line as far as the inside centre. Otherwise, the inside centre passed the ball over Laurence's head, directly to the wing.

Laurence ran up and down the pitch, following the play, waiting for his chance that never came—all the while, partly relieved he didn't get the ball.

The other team was better. It didn't take long for them to realise Aaron was good. As soon as they did, they keenly passed down the line to him. In turn, Laurence's team kept hanging on to the ball in the forwards to avoid losing possession.

A few times, the ball skimmed through Laurence's hands. He passed on quickly, even when he could hear the calls of *run*. Thankfully, his passing was decent. His throw was sharp and accurate, and had pace. Laurence didn't want to run. He didn't want to face off with Aaron. So he did what he was meant to—supported and kept his place in line.

This strategy seemed to work, for a short while, but not for the duration of the match.

Perhaps Laurence's wing had been tackled one too many times, or perhaps he was tired, or perhaps he genuinely thought Laurence deserved a bit more play. Whatever his thoughts were, the end result was that, just as it had countless times already, when ball came out to the wing he didn't hang on to it or kick it forward. He ran a few paces, looked over his shoulder, made eye contact with Laurence, and passed the ball back to him.

Laurence had no choice but to make the most of it. He tucked the ball under his arm. Then, looking ahead as he was running, he realised the reason for the wing's decision. There was a gap! He ran for it, dodging an attempt at a tackle by his opposite centre and, as he did so, saw open field.

Just like when he took off over the pommel horse at gymnastics, like when he tumbled through the air, that split second that stretched out as his whole body left the ground, defying gravity, Laurence felt the thrill and exhilaration of having the try line in his sights.

It was close. He could see where the paint and grass had been scuffed away between the posts. In seconds, if he dug in, he could be there, over the line.

From the corner of his eye, Laurence saw a flash of a red bib and no sign of support from a fellow blue. He was on his own and had no choice but to keep running. He could hear his rasping breaths, the thud of his feet on the ground, and from behind, the rumble of a chase. Laurence ploughed on, sped by fear as much as exhilaration.

The line was so close. He was—

Hard as a punch, right to the kidneys, a shoulder pummelled into Laurence's back. The full, flying weight of the tackle sent him lunging forward. He knew

he was supposed to turn and set but didn't have a chance to manoeuvre. He plunged face first into the mud. The ball was lost and the hot, heaving body of his tackler rolled off Laurence as he spat grass and mud from his mouth, desperately trying to suck in air but unable to fill his lungs.

“Laurie, you all right? I'm sorry, I had to do it.”

Laurence rolled over and Aaron was there, standing over him, arm out, with a look of terror on his face. “Can you breathe? Did I hurt you? Come on, Laurie, get up.”

Sympathy was the last thing Laurence needed. “I'm all right,” he choked out as he scrambled to his feet, turning his face away from Aaron so he wouldn't see his eyes brimming with tears. It was the shock of being winded, that's all. He didn't want anyone to think he was crying, least of all Aaron.

The coach blew the whistle for a knock-on and called for a scrum. Laurence's wing came up and patted him on the shoulder. “Never mind. That was a good run.”

The side of Laurence's face stung, and he was having trouble getting his breath back, even as he limped to his place on the back line. It wasn't the worst he'd suffered in his short career. The most painful part of it was seeing Aaron, sloping off to the other side of the pitch. Every few steps glancing back at Laurence with a look of sorrow, like he was the one who'd lost possession.

The coach called Aaron and Laurence back after the last of the Hartnell regulars had disappeared towards the clubhouse. “Nice to see you boys down here. Aaron, do you usually play on the wing?”

“No, I always get put in the forwards at school. I prefer the back line though.”

Coach Martin nodded with understanding. “You're tall for your age. In a year or two, it'll even out a bit. If I put you on the wing in the Colts now, I don't think you'd look out of place.”

Unsurprisingly, the coach was less enamoured with Laurence. “With your size and speed I think you should carry on playing the back line. Of course, you need to work on your turning and tackling, and if you could kick... we can never have too many decent kickers.”

Laurence was perfectly acquainted with his shortcomings. Coach Martin was only reiterating what had been spelled out by his PE teachers. Yet Aaron

didn't seem very pleased with the assessment. He hardly said a word as they changed out of their studs on the edge of the field. The silence continued as they crossed the footpath to their bikes, locked up outside the entrance to the clubhouse.

"You're going to get to play in the Colts," Laurence said, trying to sound upbeat as he unravelled the lock and chain that had secured their bikes together. "That's what he said, wasn't it?"

"No." Aaron abruptly pulled his bike away. "He said my size wouldn't look out of place if I was a wing on the Colts. There are loads of good players here. If they were going to move anyone up, it wouldn't be me."

Laurence didn't understand why Aaron was so angry. Maybe he felt he hadn't played well enough, which was just *wrong*. Laurence hated seeing him like this; he'd do anything, say anything to cheer him up. "I thought what he was getting at... he could see you playing for the Colts, one day. He really liked you Aaron."

"How would you know?" Aaron snapped. "What are you, some sort of expert? You can't even see what's in front of your own face."

The shock took Laurence's breath away. "What do you mean?" he asked, his voice a high tremble.

Like he was talking to an annoying imbecile, Aaron pointed his finger at Laurence's chest and enunciated slowly and viciously, "You had a player, out to your left. You could have passed, but you hung onto the ball and I had to tackle you."

Laurence balked at Aaron's tone. He'd seen him angry but he'd never been at the receiving end. Anyone else and Laurence's own temper might have flared. Anyone else and he might have pushed or shoved or spat a few angry words back of his own. But he couldn't, because disappointing Aaron had squeezed the last of the air out of him. Attempting, and failing, to sound like he wasn't crushed, he muttered, "Well, technically speaking, he was behind me."

"Yes, and that's why you're supposed to turn your head and *look*."

Aaron's voice cracked on the last word. Laurence glanced up just in time to see a pained look on his face before he pushed off through the car park. Aaron wasn't angry, he was upset.

Belatedly, Laurence called after him, "I'm sorry. I got the ball and I panicked." More quietly, he said, "Please wait for me," unsure if Aaron heard him.

Aaron stopped, head hanging, and waited for Laurence to pull up beside him. A lump had formed in Laurence's throat, and he wanted to say it didn't matter; it was part of the game, that's all. He would have told Aaron his face didn't hurt, but he couldn't draw in enough air to speak.

They stood there, a foot apart, for what felt like forever, neither quite daring to look at each other for more than a split second at a time. Until, reaching out, Aaron brushed his knuckle gently over Laurence's cheek. "You're going to have a bruise."

Aaron looked sad and sorry. Laurence had to blink hard to push back the prickling in his eyes. "That's all right. I'll put some ice on it."

Cycling home, beside Aaron when the road was clear, behind him when they got onto the busier main roads, Laurence couldn't help thinking about that touch. He'd liked it. It was—oh, God, it sounded so pathetic—it was tender. But it also made Laurence's chest clench around his thumping heart.

Besides that, as unsettling as it was, the thrill of the game persisted. Laurence had always thought he could never really enjoy rugby. He played mostly because Aaron did. Before today, he hadn't enjoyed it much. Today, he'd enjoyed it a lot.

That final run up the pitch stuck in his mind. If he'd been able to kick, he might have been able to try for a drop goal. He might have been able to chip the ball with his toe, chase it up the field. He might have been able to make the dive and score a try before Aaron got to him.

At Green Cross Corner, they were due to go their separate ways. They stopped on the pavement. Laurence studied Aaron. His shoulders looked less hunched, and his frown had eased.

Laurence asked tentatively, "I want to go back, to play for Hartnell. Do you?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I'm really glad. But if I'm going to play, I've got to get better at kicking."

"We could go on the school field and practise. I've got a ball."

“You’d help me?”

“Of course I would.” Aaron perked up. His usual open smile, the one that made Laurence’s heart skip a beat, lit up his grubby face.

Straddling their bikes, out on the street, they could only part with a nod and a “See you tomorrow.”

Not that Laurence would have given Aaron a hug, for goodness sakes.

He pedalled off slowly, pausing to look behind before he crossed lanes to turn right into Jessop Road. Aaron was already out of sight.

It was then Laurence remembered the bruise on his face, now throbbing with pain.

All spring and summer long, Laurence kicked and Aaron returned. He kicked for touch; he practiced drop kicks, goal kicks, chips and chases. When his kicks got better, Aaron got him tackling. Laurence was already strong, but he had to get harder, tougher; he had to get used to taking and getting knocks. Aaron was relentless, and Laurence was motivated. He had the bruises to show for it.

When the summer holidays started in July, there was nothing to stop them spending the best part of their free days together. Many, many days, filled with computer games, music, TV; Aaron and Laurence could while away the hours effortlessly, doing nothing except being friends who liked being friends.

If there was a certain prickling under Laurence’s skin when Aaron was near, not like when they were out on the field, bruised and aching, but when it was quiet enough he could hear his own breathing, Aaron’s breathing, well...

They were in Laurence’s bedroom the first time it happened.

Laurence was lying on the bed, scrolling through his Twitter feed on his phone. Aaron was spread out on the floor, flicking through a rugby magazine.

“Who’s your favourite player?” Aaron said. The 2007 World Cup was a couple of months away; the magazines were seeped in model-style photo coverage of the up-and-coming players.

“Douglas Reynaud.”

“Really?” Aaron turned up his nose.

“Who’s yours then?”

“Jonas Jones, obviously.”

“Why obviously?”

“He’s a legend. Youngest player to ever reach a hundred caps, fastest flanker on record—”

“Yeah, but his face looks like he walked into a bus.” Not to mention the cauliflower ears and the hideous tattoo over his neck and face.

“Oh, I see. You like Douglas Reynaud because he’s *pretty*.”

Yes, that was the reason. Reynaud bore more than a passing resemblance to Aaron.

Laurence had dug a hole he wasn’t sure he could get out of. Not now Aaron had sat up and was prowling over the carpet towards the bed.

“I do not think he’s pretty,” he said weakly.

“Why do you like him then?”

“I just *do*. He’s fun to watch. He’s got personality.”

Aaron howled with laughter and slapped the magazine down on the bed next to Laurence. It didn’t help matters that Douglas, the lovely Douglas Reynaud, was the centrefold for *The Rugby Herald* this month. The Gallic charmer was posed leaning against a goal post in a tight shirt, biceps busting, with a rugby ball clasped in one of his large and capable hands.

Kneeling up, leaning in, with the magazine open, Aaron shoved Douglas close to Laurence’s face. Aaron got closer and closer, teasing, “Go on, Laurie, give him a kiss since you love him so much. Go on, I’ll kiss Jones if you kiss Reynaud.”

“You’re a twat, you know that?” Laurence said.

Then, for reasons unknown and possibly regrettable, he kissed the picture (*in a manner that might have looked uncannily like he’d done it before*).

Aaron’s eyes went wide, his mouth wider. He snatched the magazine away, leapt up onto the bed, pinning him to the mattress with his forearms on his shoulders. His eyes were dark and serious, his body solid and heavy. Laurence was trapped.

Very quietly, Aaron said, “Are you a homo?”

Laurence closed his eyes as his guts turned to mush. Aaron’s breathing was harsh and loud, and Laurence didn’t dare look at him. All the same, he nodded.

Aaron's breath drew closer, so that Laurence could feel its warmth. He could push Aaron off. He could deny everything. If he wanted to, he could.

Seconds stretched like countless hours...

Before Laurence felt the press of Aaron's lips. The kiss was soft, gentle, over too quickly.

"Open your eyes, Laurie."

Laurence wasn't expecting the sweet affection in the kiss to be so plainly expressed on Aaron's face, or in his words.

Reaching up, clutching at Aaron's T-shirt, Laurence asked, though he already knew the answer, "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"No, not if you don't want me to. You do trust me?"

"Yes."

Aaron shifted to Laurence's side. Propped on his elbow, he draped his other arm across Laurence's chest. "Was that your first kiss?"

"Yes."

"Want to do it again?"

Laurence smirked, because, yeah, first kiss. With Aaron.

He kept his eyes open when he nodded again, searching for something more in Aaron's eyes, something that would explain what this was, what they were doing. There were no answers. Only Aaron, sort of being just like he always was, but closer.

Aaron pressed forward. Laurence opened his mouth, to taste and feel Aaron with his tongue. They moved against each other, working out a rhythm, breathing around it, through it.

With a hand behind Aaron's head, keeping him in place, Laurence ventured to kiss his jaw, along the thick tendon in his neck. When Aaron grunted, a quick, low, animal sound, Laurence felt electricity coursing through his body.

They kissed and kissed, until Laurence's Mum shouted up the stairs that dinner was ready.

It was another couple of minutes, before they gathered themselves enough to bound down the stairs, casual as could be.

“Look at the state of you two,” she said, as she put a piled-high plate down in front of each of them. “Have you been wrestling up there?”

She took her glass of wine and went out the back door to sit on the patio, seemingly uninterested in an answer. Which was just as well, really.

Laurence's cheeks were burning. Aaron hooked his ankle around Laurence's under the table and grinned like the devil he was, even as he was shovelling spaghetti into his mouth.

Chapter 3

Year 11 moved fast as lightning. Aaron turned sixteen in October, Laurence in February. It meant nothing much, except that certain things they hadn't spoken about or entertained were now legal. Most of the time, other things were more pressing.

It was inevitable, though Laurence hadn't wanted to think about it, that Aaron wouldn't choose to spend his days toiling at a desk any longer than he had to. Long before their final GCSE examinations, Aaron had decided he wouldn't be staying on into the sixth form. The local college offered more vocational courses and Aaron had decided he had a thing for wood—cabinet making. Laurence was staying on at school for A levels.

Close to two years of friendship. Come September, Laurence would feel the loss keenly. But it was still only May. Aaron was stretched out on his bed, his science revision guide propped on his chest. With Laurence prone on the floor, a pillow under his head, the two of them filled Aaron's tiny bedroom.

"I should probably be testing you," Laurence said. He watched Aaron shift his hips into the bed, his foot slide up his shin. Aaron was getting restless.

"I'm bored of revising."

Laurence was hot all over with anticipation, well before he pushed up onto his elbows to get a look at what he already knew he was going to see. Aaron was pawing at his crotch.

Letting his book fall flat to his chest, Aaron tilted his head to look at Laurence. "Just a short break, Laurie? While my mum's not home."

Laurence didn't need to be asked twice. He flung Aaron's book to the floor and took its place, lying on top of his chest, legs and tongues tangled while their hips rolled in perfect counter time.

Aaron held Laurence tight, one hand across his backside, the other possessively behind his neck.

This hip-grinding was a recent development, quite possibly borne of revision boredom and burgeoning hormones. The flash of new sensations was bright and vivid. Neither of them would last long, once they got going.

Laurence slid to Aaron's side, his thigh pressed up between Aaron's legs and kept rubbing against him. He'd come like this, in his pants, especially since Aaron had discovered his nipples.

Aaron's hand snaked up Laurence's T-shirt as if on cue, and—oh, oh, oh, *now*—he shuddered and gasped with his hand gripping the front of Aaron's jeans.

“Stay like that,” Aaron panted into Laurence's neck, as he rolled his hips up.

When Aaron came he did it with a sigh, not very loud, but enough to light Laurence up with another jolt of arousal.

Next time, he kept saying to himself, maybe I'll undo his jeans and look. Maybe I'll undo mine and Aaron will toss me off.

He wanted him to. At least he thought he did, if Aaron wanted to. Laurence didn't want to push it, just in case, just in case Aaron was only gay for him and if he pushed things too far they'd stop. He'd rather have this than nothing at all.

Just as they'd done before, they alternately snuck down the landing to the bathroom, cleaned up and returned to Aaron's bedroom.

Aaron settled on his side, his arm tucked under his head, his eyelids heavy. The room was warm, from the sun and their exertions. The smell of their sweat made the air thick and soporific. Laurence snuck in for a cuddle, tucking his back against Aaron's chest, pulling Aaron's arm around him, and closed his eyes.

Aaron's breath was warm on his neck, his body a wall of heat at his back.

“The alkali metals, Aaron. Names and properties.”

“Potassium.”

“In order, top to bottom.”

“Don't talk dirty. I'm trying to think.”

Laurence laughed into the pillow and Aaron recited, from lithium to caesium. Softly, his hand caressed the downy hair that covered Laurence's arms.

Laurence started drifting. If Aaron finished, he didn't hear it.

Azalea Gardens was a small cul-de-sac of terraced houses. The kids playing football in the middle of the road waved, moving to the pavement as Laurence's Dad drove by looking for a parking space.

When Laurence got out, a couple of junior school kids ran over. "Whew! Where are you going?"

"Year 11 Prom."

"With Aaron?" said the girl. Her name was Molly, or Polly. Laurence couldn't remember.

"Yes."

"Aren't you supposed to take a girl?" she asked, looking somewhat disgusted.

"No. That's what the Americans do. Here you just go with your mates."

"Nice car," said the boy with her. "Is that your Dad?"

"Yes."

"You must be minted."

"It's his company car."

This inquisition could have gone on all night. Aaron was popular with the little kids on the street, which meant Laurence was too. After disentangling himself from the entourage, Laurence made a dash for the Ford's front gate. Aaron's Mum was already on the doorstep, waving to Laurence to come into the front garden so she could take his and Aaron's picture by her hydrangeas.

Both boys were wearing hired tuxedos. Laurence looked like a boy pretending to look like a man. Aaron, however, could have passed for an arrestingly handsome man of twenty, or James Bond.

Laurence's cheeks flooded with warmth as Aaron bounded down the front steps and threw his arm around his shoulders. "Looking fine, Coleman," he said, his grip tightening.

Inhaling deeply, Laurence was assailed by Aaron's aftershave, the one from the black bottle. Even the tiniest whiff of it gave him a semi. Thankfully his trousers were on the loose side. Laurence stepped in closer to Aaron for the picture—how could he resist?—and smiled a genuine and happy smile.

"That's it, boys. Stay close together," Mrs Ford said, capturing them forever with her pocket digital camera.

Laurence's Dad stood by his brand new Mercedes, watching over the privet hedge (though he was probably keeping a side-eye out for the football). He gave an approving nod as Aaron and Laurence strode towards him, and in true chauffeur style, ushered them onto the back seat.

The Year 11 Prom was a joint boys' and girls' school affair. Two starched staff stood on the steps of the Bellhouse Hotel, greeting the students as they arrived with trays of orange juice and lemonade.

Mr Jaffrey and his sidekick Mr Poole were right behind them, checking pockets for alcohol and tobacco. A couple of teachers from the girls' school searched bags. While he sucked fervently on his mint, Laurence shuffled in quietly behind Aaron. The taste of the cranberry vodka shot Mrs Ford had given him "as a warm-up for the evening" was still repeating.

Inside, decorated dinner tables were arranged around the dance floor, rather like at a wedding.

"I don't know how I let you talk me into this," Aaron complained immediately. "It's all the swots at this do."

"I never thought I'd hear you complain about free food."

Not actually free. Knowing Aaron would never sign up, not least because it would have been a stretch for his Mum to fork out for the ticket and the suit hire, Laurence had given Aaron his ticket as a school-leaving gift.

"You're right," Aaron said, as he accosted a passing waiter carrying a tray of cocktail sausages. He took a polite six, shoved them one after the other into his mouth and deposited the sticks in his breast pocket. "Where's the bar? I need a coke."

They were about to head over to what looked like the drinks table when Laurence caught sight of a girl in a peach satin dress coming towards them. Her long, auburn curls were unmistakable. "Heather! You look gorgeous."

Many a play date ago, Heather Smith had clashed with Laurence over swords and tiaras. They were the tagalong siblings; their older sisters' best friends. At the sixth form open day they'd reconnected, to discover they had both opted to do an AS in History.

"Thanks. So do you. And this is?" she looked expectantly at Aaron.

"Heather, this is Aaron, my best friend."

With a flourish, Aaron took Heather's hand and kissed her knuckle.

She laughed, hooked her arms through both boys' and said, "I've put you on my table. Come over and I'll introduce you to everyone."

Heather sat next to Laurence, with Aaron on her other side and her friend, Jasmine, after that.

While Laurence and Heather caught up on the years they'd missed after primary school, she also confided that Jasmine had a massive crush on Aaron, and had begged Heather to sit her next to him.

Every so often, Aaron looked across at Laurence and rolled his eyes. If he didn't immediately grab his attention when he wanted it, he launched a bread roll, then his place card and, finally, the tomato wedge that garnished the smoked salmon starter.

For the first hour and a half, the Year 11 prom-goers sat through three courses, drank coffee and endured a dull speech from their Head of Year. Apart from the projectiles, and their fresh faces, they could have almost passed for adults.

By the time the dancing started, Aaron seemed to have warmed to his unexpected companion and was throwing her gracelessly around the dance floor to a Katy Perry song. She was wearing flat shoes, like ballerina slippers, which was a mercy given Aaron's enthusiastic twirling.

"Do you think he likes her?" Heather asked. "I mean, they look like they're having fun, but it's hard to tell."

Laurence liked to think that the way Aaron looked at him, the way his eyelids dropped, half-closed when they were alone, before they kissed, was the look of someone who liked someone else. He liked to think the way Aaron's eyes lit up the day Laurence handed him a burned CD and said, "I made you a playlist. It's some of the old stuff I like," was because he liked him.

"He's definitely flirting. But that's Aaron. I couldn't say if it means anything."

As Laurence spoke those honest words, for the first time it occurred to him that Aaron might really, genuinely like girls. He might like them as well as boys. He might like them *more* than boys.

"Shall we join them?" Heather said.

Shaking off his concern, Laurence stood and held out his hand.

Heather took it, but before they stepped out, she leaned in and said, "I meant to mention it earlier. I didn't sit next to you because I... you know? I just wanted to catch up. I'm seeing this boy from Stokebridge."

"Sure. No problem. He won't mind if I dance with you though?" Laurence said, slipping his arm around her waist, all the while keeping a sneaky eye on Aaron and his antics.

"No." She shook her head as she smiled, and her red curls shook like a cascade of flames over her shoulders.

If I was straight, Laurence mused, and strode out to shake his hips with the rest of them.

Later, over another sickly, non-alcoholic cocktail, Laurence sat shoulder to shoulder with Aaron, staring out onto the dance floor.

"Do you fancy Jasmine?"

"I might." Aaron shrugged.

"Oh." Laurence cast his gaze down between his knees.

"I might ask her out."

Laurence didn't dare look up at Aaron, let alone make a remark. He couldn't have faked a smile if he'd wanted to, and he didn't want Aaron to see his face, all prickling and numb at the same time. So he kept his head down, staring into his drink.

"Yeah. I wonder if she'll fancy coming down the pitch with me and kicking some goals."

"Kicking some goals?" Laurence's head snapped up, because his heart might be breaking but if his best friend really liked this girl he ought to be supportive and seriously—

Aaron slapped his thigh, threw his head back and laughed so loudly people on the dance floor, blanketed by decibels of music, turned to look at him. "You should have seen your face."

"So you're not going to take her to the rugby pitch?"

"I'm not taking her anywhere. Idiot." Aaron nudged Laurence's shoulder. "What do I need a girlfriend for?"

Once again, Aaron was saying something, which might have meant one something or quite another something and Laurence wasn't able to pin him down to which one it was.

The night was close to an end. Some kids had paired up for slow dancing. Some were just dancing in small clusters. There hadn't been any alcohol, but some of the boys looked drunk, arms over each other's shoulders, swaying from side to side.

It wouldn't have looked out of place, for Laurence to pull Aaron to his feet, to dance with him if he was cool about doing that. But it was impossible. Laurence couldn't touch Aaron without electricity sparking over his skin. They'd never be able to dance together tonight, like the straight kids did.

Laurence didn't get the chance to get sadder or riled, because Heather saved him. Or snatched him, depending on how you looked at it.

Colbie Caillat was singing "Realize". Laurence went with her. When he caught Aaron's eye, he wanted so much to tell him, I shouldn't be dancing with Heather, not to *this* song.

They turned slowly and by the time the place where Aaron had been sitting came back into view, Aaron was gone. Laurence tried not to be obvious. He scanned the heads, the peppering of black jackets between the rainbow of fancy frocks.

"Room for one more?"

It was Aaron! He ducked his head under Heather's arm and grabbed them both.

"Sure," Heather laughed.

At which point, Jasmine skipped over and wedged herself between Aaron and Heather.

Still, Aaron's left arm was hooked tightly around Laurence's waist.

Laurence wished more than anything that Aaron knew the meaning of the song lyrics he was singing; that he meant the words to be for him as he sang, top of his voice, while the four of them turned slow circles to the last song of the night.

Chapter 4

In the sixth form, Laurence's social circle expanded to include new boys and girls. They were at that in-between age where common room conversation could go seamlessly from which university was top of their list to the relative merits of Cocoa Pops over Lucky Charms.

The milestones came and went as first Laurence learned to drive, then, by virtue of his date of birth, he earned the right to vote, to buy alcohol and to run with the big boys.

The weekends were, as ever, all about Aaron. And Aaron, when he wasn't chiselling or planing or regaling Laurence with the properties of cherry wood, was all about rugby.

"Got your lucky boots on, Coleman?" Harry shouted across the changing rooms.

"Yeah, his dog pissed on them. Want a sniff?" Aaron said, snatching Laurence's stud and slinging it in the direction of Harry's head.

One might have supposed that as Laurence and Aaron moved from U-16 to U-18 and then, every now and then to the Colts, the talk in the changing rooms would have matured accordingly. If so, one would have supposed wrong.

The game was a friendly. This didn't actually mean that it was friendly *per se*. Only that the score didn't count towards the league.

Both teams played hard and fast for ninety minutes. The score stayed level until a rogue try, scored by Hartnell's hooker, no less, from a fast-rolling maul, tipped the score in their favour.

The home team, Fendon Rangers, stood behind their try line with faces like rabid beasts. They didn't howl or call out, but Laurence could feel an imminent rumble. As soon as he moved, they were going to storm out.

It shouldn't have mattered. The kick was a gift—straight in front of the posts. Laurence lined up the ball, took three steps back and one to the side, just as he always did. He lined his sight from the ball to the posts, to the space between. Then he bent his knees and elbows, clenched his fists and loosened them.

He'd made kicks like this hundreds of times, and he wasn't going to miss, whatever distraction Fendon had in store. He blocked out everything except the ball and the posts.

At last, centred, Laurence moved, one step forward, swung his leg back and followed through with the kick.

The toe of his boot hit the ball. It rocketed, low and fast. Laurence had given it an almighty belt. It took off at such speed that the opposition were barely two steps over the try line as they watched the ball sail between the posts, hands falling in unsurprised dismay.

The elation was short-lived. Time slowed. The remainder of the ball's trajectory played out in front of Laurence's eyes in horrific certainty.

The old man was walking his dog on the footpath that edged the grounds. Everyone was shouting. Laurence could hear the noise though he couldn't hear exactly what they were saying. The man turned as if he saw it coming. Laurence wasn't sure if the way he lifted his arms was a belated attempt at self-defence or an attempt to catch the ball. Whichever it was, it failed.

The ball smacked the old man squarely on the forehead.

He was instantly felled. And he didn't get up.

The game was abandoned as players, parents, the ref and assorted passers-by rushed to the end of the field. Someone was already there with a phone as Laurence pushed his way forward, through a closed circle of people, to where the man was lying on the ground.

"I've got his dog," a lady shouted from somewhere to Laurence's right.

The old man was clutching his head. He looked up at Laurence, his milky eyes unfocused. He wasn't dead. He wasn't unconscious.

Thank goodness, thank goodness, thank goodness. "I'm so sorry. I didn't see you. I never meant to..."

A frail old hand, cold and dry and rigid, reached up for Laurence's sleeve.

"So you're the bugger with the boot?" He grinned, wheezed and coughed.

"Yes, sir. I'm so sorry."

A male voice from behind said, "Give him some air."

Laurence was guided away and amidst slaps and laughter. Coach Martin fell into step alongside Laurence. "You all right to play the last seven minutes?"

Since he'd got over the fear of the early days, Laurence had dished out his fair share of hard tackles. He'd seen the results, of players being floored, winded and shaken after one of his flying takedowns. But he'd never really hurt anyone. Not like Aaron. With his extra weight and indefatigable aggression, he'd had players his size limping and crying, or worse still, flat out on their backs waiting for the first aider.

Some kids enjoyed hurting people. They went out of their way to do it unnecessarily. Not Aaron, and definitely, not Laurence. Just like that, as the recollection of the old man toppling resurfaced, Laurence's vision went blurry.

He reeled and had to take a step back to steady himself. "I'm fine, Coach."
If I don't throw up.

Aaron was behind him. "Legend, Coleman. You are a legend," he said as he dug his fingers in Laurence's ribs and pushed him back onto the pitch.

The last minutes passed in a blur that extended into the changing rooms and on into clubhouse bar, where players, parents and club members were convening. Laurence wasn't the only one leaving for university after the summer, and everyone wanted to send the boys off with some good cheer.

After a hearty home-made chilli, the bar was called to silence for the awards.

Thanks were given to coaches, parents and players, as Laurence and his friends sat huddled around two crowded tables. Usually they didn't pay much attention. Today they were all ears. The end of an era deserved the hush.

The Fendon Chairman's rousing speech was mercifully short. As he came to a close, the Hartnell boys looked at each other in anticipation.

"All that remains for me is to ask you all to raise your glasses for the Man Of The Match."

Man Of The Match was an honour conveyed to a member of the away team by the home side. The Fendon Chair continued, "This player was a consistent and unfailing asset to his team today, unfazed in the face of a rather unfortunate accident."

It was going to be Aaron. He deserved it. Laurence was glad...

"Laurence Coleman, many, many congratulations." He raised his glass and the whole room cheered.

"To the Man Of The Match!"

In two years, Laurence had never won the auspicious title. But today, at last, he'd finally done it. He took his cup with nervous pride, not sure if he deserved it, not after sending a pensioner off the grounds in an ambulance.

On the way home, sitting next to Aaron in the minibus, it occurred to Laurence that this wasn't just his last time playing for Hartnell, for a long time at least. It was his last time playing on the same side as Aaron. They'd hardly see each other once the season was over.

"Hey, Laurie, look."

Coach Martin's wife's video camera was doing the rounds. Aaron, Laurence and two boys sitting behind them crowded around the tiny screen and watched the kick that was already being hailed as the Coleman Killer.

The boys whooped and gasped as the old man fell. But for a few seconds afterwards, as everyone flocked towards the fallen man, Laurence wasn't bothered about seeing himself, running to the scene of the accident. His eyes were transfixed on Aaron, who was right behind him. Even when Laurence didn't see him, Aaron was covering his back. Always.

As the camera left their hands, on its journey to the back of the bus, Laurence nuzzled in to Aaron's shoulder, though not close enough for anyone else to notice.

"Let me see your trophy," Aaron said.

With it being a farewell, Fendon had splashed out.

"You should have won it," Laurence said. "You set the play up more times than I did." He'd played well, for sure, but the trophy was an unpleasant reminder he played 'so well', he'd nearly killed someone who wasn't even on the pitch.

"Rubbish. You totally deserved it." Aaron turned the trophy reverentially in his hands and said seriously, "Make sure you get this engraved. With the date and everything."

When he handed it back to Laurence, his hand lingered, his fingers stretched into a tender touch. When he settled back into his seat, he pressed his thigh alongside Laurence's, where it stayed for the rest of the drive home.

The summer was filled with parties and good-byes.

Laurence's family was hosting a barbecue, on the last weekend in July, before the A-level results came out.

Along with neighbourhood friends, Laurence's sisters were going to be there, including Lisa and her husband, Louise and her latest boyfriend, as well as the ever-single Leanne.

Aaron's Mum was invited but had to work, so Aaron came on his own before the arrival of the other guests.

Mr Coleman was attempting to put bunting up around the garden. "Come and help me with this fence, Aaron."

"He's a cabinet maker, not a general dog's body," Laurence's Mum said.

"I don't mind, Mrs Coleman."

"All right. But, Frank, don't you go getting his nice shirt dirty, or yours for that matter. Laurie, love, would you help me with the potato salad?"

It might have irked Laurence that his Dad had automatically asked Aaron, but he and his sisters had all proved equally useless and dangerous with a hammer. Laurence went into the kitchen and started chopping chives. Aaron loved this type of food.

Aaron.

Exeter was far away. Two and a half hours in the car, longer by train because of the change of lines and the Tube across London.

Aaron said he'd get a car. At the moment, on top of his cabinet-making course, he was working part-time hod carrying for a builder friend of his Mum's and was saving everything. Once he had an apprenticeship, he'd be earning more money, and once he was qualified, once he had a job... Aaron's eyes always lit up when he got to that part.

Meantime, they could Skype, email. It wouldn't be the same, but it would do.

"Laurence! You're mashing up the potatoes."

"Sorry, Mum. I was miles away."

"Go on outside. Enjoy the sun. And Laurie, love, try and stay with us, just for the next couple of months."

After the food, the Coleman girls provided the entertainment with a guitar and some song. Laurence and Aaron stretched out on the grass on a picnic

blanket. Side by side, to the old tunes that had been a part of Laurence's childhood and for the last four years, Aaron's too, they hummed along.

The sun had disappeared behind a cloud. Laurence opened his eyes and turned to look at Aaron. His eyes were closed behind his sunglasses. He might have looked like he was asleep, only Laurence knew the cadence of his breathing when he slept, knew just how far his chest rose and fell when his autonomic nervous system took over.

Aaron's little finger brushed against Laurence's, his cheeks tightened against a smile.

The music and voices faded into the background as a wash of different emotions consumed Laurence with overwhelming intensity: fear, desire and possessiveness. Another two months and he would be gone. He was looking forward to it, but every time he set his sights on Exeter, thoughts of Aaron weren't far behind.

University wouldn't be the same without Aaron there. Just like school. Laurence wouldn't know what Aaron was doing or who he was spending his time with. They wouldn't be an everyday part of each other's lives anymore.

More than ever, Laurence wanted every minute he had left with Aaron to count. He turned his head to whisper, "Do you want to get out of here?"

"Sure."

"Mum," Laurence pushed up to call out, "can I give Aaron a lift home?"

"How much have you had to drink?"

"Nothing. Just half a shandy before lunch."

"Go on then."

As they drove, the rosy hue that had coloured Aaron's cheeks when he was lying in the sun didn't subside. When they reached his house, his eyes looked heavy, dark, like he was ready for bed, though not sleep.

"Come upstairs." Aaron took Laurence's hand. "I've got something for you."

Aaron's home was as familiar to Laurence as his own. The smell of Mrs Ford's potpourri in the bowl in the hall, the creak of the fourth stair, the pictures of Aaron lining the wall, of when he was small, before Laurence knew him.

Laurence had thought about this moment for a long time. They needed to talk about the way they were with each other, what they'd been doing in their bedrooms the last few years. Laurence wanted to know what was going to happen between them when they were so many miles apart...

Aaron dragged Laurence into his room. "Come *on*, Laurie."

Laurence sat on the bed. On the windowsill, in a wooden frame, was the photo from two years ago, of him and Aaron in front of Mrs Ford's hydrangeas. On top of Aaron's wardrobe were trophies and the silly souvenirs Laurence had brought him back from Cornwall and France and Italy—places Aaron had never been to.

When Aaron handed Laurence his gift, Laurence was already choked.

"You can't tell me you don't like it. You haven't even opened it yet," Aaron said, kneeling in front of him, closing his hands over Laurence's knees.

Laurence took the package out of the paper bag and tore off the white tissue paper to reveal a dark, polished wooden box.

Reaching out for Aaron's jaw, closing his hand around it, Laurence said with wonder, "Aaron, did you...?"

"Yes. I made it, at college. It's a humidior, except mine doesn't have the humidity thing inside it so it's just a box really. But the outside's Spanish cedar wood and the inside is mahogany. I thought you could put stuff in it, like cufflinks."

"It's brilliant. I love it."

For someone about to study for an English degree, Laurence was pitifully at a loss for better words to express his gratitude. So he put the box carefully down on Aaron's bedside table, put his hand behind Aaron's neck and drew him up from where he was kneeling to kiss him.

They'd done this a thousand times before, and yet, there was always something, up to now that had held them back from doing everything. Not anymore.

"Have you gone all the way with anyone yet?"

Aaron almost growled. "No. I've only... only you."

"Do you want to? Now?"

Laurence wasn't sure if it was uncertainty or desire that pulled at Aaron's face. He turned away, unable to face the rejection if Aaron said no.

"I want to," Aaron said with a kiss to the tip of Laurence's ear.

Then he opened his bedside drawer and reached into the back, pulled out a white tube that looked like hand cream. When Laurence looked more closely, he saw it was lubricant.

It wasn't like Laurence had lived under a rock his entire youth, nor Aaron. He'd read enough here and there to know what he needed to do, how to be safe, how to prepare himself. He'd tried it with his fingers.

Like the first time he'd kissed or the first time Aaron had put his fingers around his cock, Laurence knew his imagination was no comparison to the real thing. There was no way to imagine the minute details that brought an experience to life, that made neurons fire at a smell, at a look, at a caress. As much as he was excited, Laurence was nervous.

They undressed more hesitantly than before, where the removal of their clothes had come in fits and starts between kisses and touches. Carefully, Aaron laid out Laurence's clothes on the chest of drawers, and when he was bared himself, his cock hard and jutting out in front of him, he looked shy.

Laurence waited on the bed, his rigid shaft pointing upwards on his belly from the thatch of bronze hair on his groin. He held out his hand for Aaron, and Aaron came to him, pressed up to his side, sliding his leg between Laurence's thighs as they kissed.

"Should I turn on my side?" Laurence asked, his voice hoarse and unsteady. "I need to get the lube inside, and um..." He didn't want to say 'loosen my hole'.

"I can do that," Aaron whispered, "if you want."

Laurence did want, even if he was worried about it being the most private part of him and what if he hadn't cleaned well enough? He closed his eyes and nodded.

Turning on his side, his face to the wall, with Aaron beside him, Laurence rested his head on the pillow and drew his knees up slightly. When Aaron slid in a single finger, when the cool slide stretched him full, he gasped, "I'm glad it's you. I always wanted it to be you."

Aaron made a whimpering noise and kissed the back of Laurence's head. "Me too."

Slowly, Aaron worked in two fingers, then three, as each time Laurence wasn't sure he could take the breach. Yet he did and as the dull ache receded, it was followed by a release, a relief that he was almost there. This was really happening.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes.” Behind him, Laurence could hear the rip of foil, and the jerking motion of Aaron rolling the condom over his cock. “Aaron?”

“Yeah.”

“If I can't come, you don't have to try to hang on or anything. Just do your best.”

Aaron's whole body shook with laughter. “Do my best? Okay, babe. That's what I was aiming for.”

Aaron had never called him babe. He'd only ever called him Laurie, and it sent a new flood of heat through him, a deep sense of comfort that had, up to now, only skirted the periphery of his senses.

Some of the tension eased. Laurence laughed and when the head of Aaron's cock stretched him—slowly, slowly then, *oh*, it was in—it wasn't nearly as painful as he'd anticipated. Aaron was slightly longer and thicker than Laurence, not massive, but more than enough. The feel of his shaft sliding in, in the smallest of increments, filling him, took Laurence's breath away.

“I'm all the way in,” Aaron said, his voice high and tight.

“You can move.”

The rest happened quickly, in a blur of anxious nerves and fearful, tender love.

Aaron didn't last long enough for Laurence to come. However, the spasms and jolts as he came, groaning loudly, buried balls deep inside Laurence was the most intimate feeling he'd ever experienced. In all their years of being close, it was the most special.

Laurence reached behind to hold Aaron in place after he'd stilled, while his breathing slowed. “Don't pull out yet.”

Taking his cock in his hand, Laurence was going to finish himself off, but Aaron reached around him and said, “Let me.” His rapid strokes were firm, determined. With Aaron's cock softening inside him, Laurence reached his climax quickly.

In wonder, Aaron said, “I can feel it. I can feel you coming,” as Laurence clenched and shuddered through the aftershocks.

Wrapped in Aaron’s arms, Laurence didn’t know what to say. They were all right with the silence, they always had been, but Laurence’s imminent departure was a black cloud hanging between them.

At last, he ventured, “When I’m in Exeter…”

“I know. It’s all right. What goes on in Exeter, stays in Exeter.”

Laurence didn’t get the chance to say *likewise*, as Aaron flipped him over onto his back. Wriggling his way down between Laurence’s thighs, Aaron bit down gently on his nipple. Down and down, he bit and licked. Well before it was enveloped in the heat of Aaron’s mouth, Laurence’s cock was hard again.

Chapter 5

Laurence came out to his family a week before he left for university. Once he got to Exeter, he joined the very quiet LGBTQ Society and even more quietly involved himself in writing their newsletters. Exeter, it appeared, was not the university to attend if you planned on a flamboyant coming out—which suited Laurence fine.

Despite the low key presence of a 'society' on campus, there was no shortage of talent if you knew where to look. During the first term, Laurence had sex with Artie, then CJ.

Being away from home was like letting out a huge exhale: Laurence was free to breathe all the way out and all the way in again. Sometimes, though, he would think about the newfound gay abandon he had in Exeter and then he would think about Aaron, and how he missed him.

No matter what they'd promised or what they'd thought a year ago, Laurence and Aaron weren't close like they used to be. It was impossible; staying in touch long distance wasn't the same as being close.

So it was out of the blue, unexpected, at the start of an unseasonably warm summer term that Aaron asked if he could visit for a weekend. Laurence didn't hold back on his enthusiasm. A weekend with Aaron, no parents, no sneaking about in deserted lanes in the back of Laurence's Mum's car. Not to mention, Laurence was, well—he thought it was fair to say—more worldly-wise, more of a man these days.

Aaron called when he was ten minutes away from campus. Laurence ran down to the car park to meet his treasured friend, who was driving all the way to Exeter in his newly purchased secondhand car. It was nothing flashy, a little Peugeot, but as Aaron said, a few years of safe driving and no claims and he'd work his way up to something with 'more poke'.

Laurence paced and craned his neck, looking out for the silver 206. When at last Aaron turned into the drive, Laurence jumped up and down. He waved and signalled to an empty space, unable to temper the grin that had broken across his face.

Pulling in with a screech, Aaron leapt out of the car and, no hesitation, wrapped his arms around Laurence in a crushing hug. He smelled of Noir and

his arms felt like home, and Laurence, without thinking, pressed a firm kiss on Aaron's cheek. Aaron didn't flinch away and he didn't let go.

"No boyfriend, then?" Aaron said, pulling back a fraction, giving Laurence a long, assessing look.

"No."

"So I've got you to myself for the weekend?" Aaron's eyes lifted and his hold tightened a fraction more, if that was possible.

"You sure have."

"Good. But what happened to all my curls?"

My curls. Laurence's heart jumped. "I had my head shaved for charity. You should have seen how long it had got before—I hadn't had it cut for six months."

"I bet it was gorgeous," he said with affection. "I'm glad I didn't see it go. Would have killed me."

Having Aaron with him again, it hit Laurence hard how much he'd missed him. Only for an instant though. Then it was like they'd never been apart because Aaron was here, large as life, grinning like a fool and holding on like he couldn't bear to let Laurence go.

This was going to be the best weekend ever. Laurence would make sure of it.

They walked, Aaron with his bag in one hand and his other arm over Laurence's shoulder, Laurence carrying the crate of beer Aaron had thoughtfully brought with him.

"You'll like Marv," Laurence said. "He plays second row for the rugby team. His girlfriend plays for the women's team. If you like, we can go and watch. They've got a match this afternoon."

"In April?"

"Yeah. It's just a practice I think, against the town side. But they're pretty good. They move the ball around a lot more than the men. And Marv says there are a couple of their forwards he wouldn't mind having on the men's team. I wasn't sure if that's because they're good, or so he could grab their arses in the scrum."

Aaron looked amused, or enamoured. Laurence wasn't sure. Whatever it was, it already felt good and right having Aaron here, to show him where he lived, his new life.

The communal area of the flat was empty. Ten thirty on a Saturday morning was obscenely early, after all.

"This is nice." Aaron did a full turn, took his time looking at the sofas, the scattered newspapers, the takeaway boxes on the dining table, the kitchen sink piled high with dirty dishes and a dozen coffee cups.

Laurence grabbed the Sharpie from the top of the fridge and scrawled his name over the box of beer before shoving it onto the top shelf. No one in the flat had any respect for claims on milk but they never touched anyone else's alcohol.

"It's Sid's turn to tidy up," Laurence said. "He'll be up by lunchtime, but we'll get something to eat at the Student Union." He added, "Everyone's around this weekend, except Julian. He's gone home for the weekend. Family party, I think."

The lads in the flat weren't in each other's pockets, but they kept their eyes out for each other. It was easy to lose your way in the first year.

Aaron nodded and followed Laurence to his room. Once the door was closed, Laurence was half-expecting Aaron to pounce on him.

Maybe it was being in a new place that was completely familiar to Laurence that held Aaron back. He was quiet. He put his bag on the floor at the end of the bed and surveyed Laurence's room as he had the living area of the flat. He looked along the bookshelf, ran his fingertip over the spines: Marlowe, Milton, Homer and Pope.

Laurence couldn't tell what he was thinking, whether he was disappointed with where he was living, pleased or simply taking it in. The elation they'd shared in the car park, on the walk up to the flat, had evaporated faster than summer dew. And the air between them had cooled.

Gazing out of the window, over an uninspiring view of some shrubbery, Aaron asked, "What time is the match?"

"Not until two, I think."

"You want to show me around Exeter, then?"

Of course, Aaron had never been here. Laurence just needed to show him around, let him know he was settled. There were the underground passages, the castle and the cathedral. He brightened at once. Aaron was going to love Exeter; it was so different to the boring little commuter town they'd grown up in.

"Let's get a bus in. That way we can have a pint."

"Just us?"

"Yes, sure. Just us."

Exeter Cathedral was unequivocally one of the most impressive buildings Laurence had ever seen. He'd visited with his parents when he was choosing a university, on their insistence, and had afterwards reluctantly admitted he was awed. That didn't mean he would subject Aaron to the day-eating grandeur of the full tour. They were young and carefree. The pub beckoned.

Except Aaron, upon taking one look at the outside, blew out a long whistle and said, "We're going in?" like he actually wanted to.

"Sure. But you have to pay."

Reaching into his back pocket, Aaron pulled out a sleek black wallet Laurence hadn't seen before. "I've got it. And lunch after."

"You don't have to. I've got money."

"I *want* to."

He meant it, and Laurence felt that familiar warm tingle at the gesture. No one else made him feel special in the way Aaron did. No one. The pub could wait. "Prepare to be impressed," Laurence said, and for an unselfconscious moment he almost, *almost* took Aaron by the hand before leading the way.

By the time they got back to campus and over to the sports ground, the rugby match was into the second half.

Marv was cheering from the touchline. When he saw Aaron and Laurence approaching, he looked pleased for the company. "Hey, you must be Aaron. Laurence said you were coming. Nice to meet you."

He held out his hand, and Aaron reached out immediately to shake it. "You too."

They talked rugby, and Laurence earned a pointed look from Marv and Aaron when it was revealed he hadn't joined the men's side. But he was in luck. At that particular juncture, the women's game was of more interest to both of them.

Aaron asked, "Which one's your girlfriend?"

"Number twelve." Marv pointed over to Elise, just as she was slammed by the shoulder of an oncoming opposition player. She stayed on her feet, unsteadied but not grounded, and turned as three of her teammates ploughed into the maul. Marv winced.

"Do you hate it," Aaron asked, "when she gets hit?"

"It's all I can do not to run over and pick her up. But when she takes someone down... She's a firecracker." Marv was smitten. It was written all over his face.

"She looks it," Aaron remarked, in obvious admiration. "I've seen blokes twice her size topple over after being pummelled that hard."

Marv puffed up a little more at the compliment, as if it had been paid to him. "We're going out in town later. Why don't you join us?"

"Sure. If Laurie doesn't mind."

"No, I don't mind. You definitely shouldn't pass up a night out with this lot. They're good fun. They make the men's team look like saints."

The sun was shining down in fullest spring glory and by the time they'd strolled back to the flat, sweat prickled the length of Laurence's spine. Aaron must have felt the heat too because once they were back in Laurence's room, after he'd helped himself to a beer from the kitchen fridge, he peeled off his shirt and kicked off his shoes. "I'm parched," he said, swigging back a long mouthful.

At last, he looked more relaxed. Laurence could breathe again. He'd wanted to touch Aaron, explore him, take him apart like he used to—except for now, with the benefit of more experience, more confidence. The thought made the hairs on the back of his neck bristle, his nipples tighten.

"They were pretty good, weren't they?" Aaron said, face quirking up into a smile.

"You sound surprised."

“Not really. I’ve seen women play before. Never enjoyed it as much as that, though.”

“Oh? Something you want to tell me?”

“*No*. What about you? Why aren’t you playing anymore?”

“I don’t know. Too many other things going on, I suppose. I’m doing some theatre this term—”

Just then, Aaron spotted something of interest behind Laurence. He reached past him. “You’ve still got the ball?” Aaron extracted the old Gilbert from where it was wedged between the top bookshelf and a row of paperbacks.

All the Under-18s that had left Hartnell for university had been given a rugby ball signed by all their teammates. Aaron’s name was there, pride of place, over the ‘Gilbert’ logo. His fingers dawdled over the stitching, staring intently at the writing as if spellbound, until he looked up and said quietly, “Are you happy here, Laurie?”

Laurence took a step closer and placed his hands over Aaron’s, around the ball he was holding. “I love it here. But I’ve missed you.”

“Even with all the brainy talent you’ve got to choose from?”

Was that it? Was that why Aaron hadn’t visited before? It had never occurred to Laurence, not for one second, ever, that Aaron, *his* Aaron would be worried about—

Laurence moved closer and put his hand behind Aaron’s neck. For the first time, Laurence felt like he could envelop him in his arms, hold him safe like Aaron used to do to him, when he was smaller and less sure of himself. “Do you remember how you got me through GCSE maths?”

“I didn’t have to do much. You were a fast learner.”

Laurence pressed in close enough he was able to speak softly against Aaron’s lips. “I still am.”

Pushing Aaron backwards, nudging him with baby steps until his legs bumped the edge of the bed, Laurence eased his friend down. He took the ball from his hands and set it beside him, taking Aaron’s mouth urgently, as if he could impress a year’s worth of love and affection into a single kiss.

Aaron groaned, succumbed at once, and fell back. Dropping to his knees, Laurence undid Aaron’s jeans and pulled them down, over his hips and off with

his socks, throwing them aside. Then, kneeling between Aaron's legs, Laurence surveyed this beautiful man. "You've lost weight." Laurence ran his hands down the bumps of Aaron's abs and squeezed the sparse flesh on his waist.

"You've grown."

"Beer, weights and the Coleman late-bloomer gene."

"You're not done yet, then? Are you still growing?"

"I might be." Laurence winked.

"*Oh...*" Aaron didn't say any more as Laurence skimmed his fingers over the thin cotton of his boxers. Aaron was hard already, the ruddied line of his cock peeped through the gaping slit in the front.

Laurence could have taken him in his mouth like that. But he wanted to kiss him first, feel him in his arms, his hot skin and breath. Settling on the bed next to Aaron, Laurence touched his nipples and felt him tense, heard his breath catch.

"I'm going to take good care of you," Laurence said.

Aaron didn't reply, except with a nod, put his arm around Laurence and leaned back, letting him lick and taste, breathe in the scent of fresh sweat and arousal.

When Laurence had worked his way down, had mouthed kisses and blown breathily over Aaron's boxers, while his rigid cock twitched beneath, Laurence paused. He rested his head on Aaron's thigh and looked.

It was broad daylight. Aaron was tanned, back from his first holiday abroad to Tenerife. He looked well on it, seasoned.

Laurence slid his hand beneath the hem of Aaron's boxers, kneaded his fingers through the coarse hair on his balls while Aaron bucked and gasped like it was the first time.

"Soon, love. I want to look at you."

"You've seen me before."

"Shhh."

Laurence had seen all of Aaron, just about. But he hadn't *seen*. Not like he was seeing now. From inside Aaron's boxers, Laurence closed his fingers around the base of his cock and lifted it up, exposing it to the air through the opening at the front.

He kissed away the bead of fluid shining from the slit, rested his head down once more to memorise the thick vein that meandered its length. With his fingertips, he soothed the velvety skin that covered Aaron's solid erection, while breathing in his musky scent, Aaron's essence. He would taste him, drink him down, all in his own good time.

Aaron's hand, the one resting on Laurence's back, gripped at his T-shirt, and his thighs alternately tensed and relaxed beneath Laurence's chest. Laurence slid his left hand under Aaron's lower back, cosseting him in as close to an embrace as he could give. Then, only then, did he slide his lips firmly around the head of Aaron's cock.

"Laurie. So good, so good." Aaron's voice was a plea, and Laurence couldn't help but smile. He'd hardly even got started.

Using the weight of his shoulders to hold him in place, Laurence teased Aaron's cockhead with the tip of his tongue, dipping into the slit to taste the steady rise of emerging fluid. Glancing up, Aaron was flushed with arousal, across his shoulders, over his cheekbones, and his eyes fluttered open and closed, as if no longer under his control. If he was this gone already, he was going to lose it completely when—

Laurence pulled his lips over his teeth and slid down Aaron's whole length, his tongue pressing forward, until he almost gagged. Aaron cried out, and Laurence ignited. Sucking relentlessly up and down, he intensified the attention he was giving Aaron's cock with his hand, synchronising the rhythm of his mouth at the top with his hand at the bottom.

"Laurie, I'm gonna come."

Laurence didn't stop. He hummed his approval around Aaron's cock until, on a long, low groan, Aaron jerked then stilled, and Laurence's mouth was filled with the warm, salty tang of Aaron's release. He swallowed and held Aaron in his mouth until he began to soften, and wriggle. Then they kissed, the taste of Aaron's semen still fresh on his lips.

"First class," Aaron said, voice husky and low, pulling Laurence down over him.

He looked softer now, pliant, like Laurence could wrap him around his body and assimilate him into his own skin. How Laurence's cock ached; his whole body ached for one thing. And he hoped, so much, that Aaron would let him, would want him to. "Have you ever...?" Laurence ran his fingers through Aaron's hair and kissed him fleetingly on the lips. "Can I...?"

“Do you want to fuck me?”

“Yes.”

Looking wrecked and irresistibly flushed, Aaron said, “I want you. I want you to do whatever you want.”

Laurence stripped himself, then Aaron, and opened him slowly with his fingers and his tongue. He entered him with Aaron's ankles over his shoulders and came with Aaron's legs wrapped around his waist.

They didn't make it out that evening. Not out for drinks with the women's rugby team, not out of Laurence's flat, not out of his room, not out of his bed. No one called, texted or knocked on the door. And barely a minute passed where they were more than a breath or a kiss apart.

On Sunday, as the balance of hours they'd spent reconnecting surpassed those they had left together, Laurence felt at once peaceful, happy and desperately sad. He hated good-byes, no matter how temporary. Aaron must have been feeling the same. He got quieter and quieter as the hour hand turned from single to double digits and back to singles again. Only his unfailing touch assured Laurence he hadn't regretted spending almost an entire weekend in bed.

Aaron left in the late afternoon. Before he got into his car he said, “I'm glad you like it here. I'm really proud of you.” He held Laurence too tight, and he wouldn't look at him once he was in the driver's seat.

At the time, Laurence hadn't realised it was more than a 'see you again in the summer' kind of good-bye. Maybe that hadn't been Aaron's intention. It wasn't Laurence's. But the summer came, with bar work and travelling and too much reading, and then it was gone. The Skyping stopped, the texts dwindled to nothing and the emails went from weeks to months apart.

Aaron had a job, a car and was well on his way to becoming a fully qualified cabinet maker. Laurence was a student of the arts—the antithesis of the working man. Yet despite their differences, Laurence thought they'd always march to the beat of the same drum.

As he occasionally took pause to remember fondly their weekend in April, he couldn't tell which of them had fallen out of step. Only that one or both of them had.

Chapter 6

During his second year at university, Laurence spent some of his free time working backstage for a local amateur production of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. He also wrote a short play based loosely on his experience growing up with three older sisters, which was performed to mainly positive reviews by a group of final year drama students. Then, when this busy and successful academic year had come to an end, he went to America for ten weeks to work at a residential summer camp on the west coast of Michigan. Upon his return home in September, he vowed never again.

For his final year, Laurence moved from the off-campus shared house of his second year back into university-based accommodation. If he knuckled down, he'd stay on track for a first class degree, and he could only do that without the distractions that were an unavoidable aspect of living in a shared house.

In the evenings, he kept the door to his room closed. It was a given that a closed door meant 'do not disturb' which his flatmates, also in their final year, adhered to and respected. Two years before, a lifetime ago, a closed door could as easily have been a signal of distress, a challenge, a dare, far more than a request for privacy. Those halcyon days were a nothing but a memory now.

Lying on his bed, nose deep in a book, or trying to find sleep, Laurence often thought of Aaron. He wondered if he'd met someone; if that was why he never heard from him anymore.

Rather than pick up his phone, because Laurence wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer, he invented an ever-growing list of reasons for the lapse in their friendship: they'd grown apart, they'd ruined it by sleeping with each other, they'd never really had anything in common except rugby, which Laurence had only ever played because of his stupid crush.

Every excuse Laurence made left a bad taste in his mouth. Bullshit in that quantity was difficult to swallow. Easier to put Aaron out of his mind and focus on studying.

When the term finished in early December, Laurence stayed an extra week in Exeter before taking the train home to Kent, partly wishing he could have stayed there a week longer. Not so much because he was overloaded with degree work, but because three weeks at home with his parents, now both retired, was going to be a bore.

Two days at home and Laurence was twitching from too much tea and unwanted attention. He went for a walk, covering ground that used to be as familiar as the back of his hand, and in many ways still was: the gnarly tree that had warped and splintered the Harris' side fence at the end of the street, the neglected burgundy Morris Minor on the driveway in front of number 36.

Other things, however, had changed in subtle ways that weren't at first noticeable. The bridge over the railway was painted the same grey it had always been. But how many fresh coats overlaid the graffiti from five years ago, when Laurence had crossed it daily on his way to King's? Declarations of love and insults still decorated its length. The sentiments were the same as ever. Only the names had changed.

On the other side of the bridge, the old lumber yard had been demolished. The iron framework was in place for a new building. It could have been anything at this stage. Only an artist's impression on the board attached to the fence heralded the arrival of a new garage.

Without really thinking about it, Laurence walked the two miles to the gates of his old school. The term hadn't yet finished and the harried movement of teenaged boys danced in the windows like glimpses into the past.

What had happened to the boys he and Aaron used to be? Most of the time, Laurence still felt the same as he did when he was fifteen. The years had added some bulk, a thicker skin and a certain confidence. But beneath he was still Laurence, who had always felt more than himself, better than himself when he was with Aaron.

If there was a chance that even the tiniest part of Aaron felt the same way...

Before he had a chance to overthink it, before his finger stopped hovering over his phone and he shoved it back in his pocket, Laurence sent a text. It had been a long time—too long. He shouldn't have felt this anxious, or guilty; the lack of communication went both ways.

I'm home for Christmas. Was hoping I could see you.

Aaron's reply was almost instantaneous.

Can you come out tonight?! Coach Martin is having a retirement party at the club. He'd love to see you. So would I.

Laurence ran home, his elation keeping him going when his stamina no longer could. After dinner, a shower and long deliberation over what to wear, his Dad gave him a lift and a twenty.

“Have a good time, son,” he said. “Give our regards to Aaron. Tell him he’s welcome to pop over any time.”

“Will do. And thanks, Dad.”

He hated taking money from his parents, especially now they were living on a pension, but his Dad had insisted. “Christmas treat,” he’d said as his Mum gave him the wrapped box that should have been for his nephew.

“I’ll get him another one when I go to Tesco’s this week,” she said.

Laurence was their youngest, and their most absent. He was the only one who’d never brought someone home, except Aaron. But that didn’t count, not in the way it should. Not yet.

It had been two and a half years since Laurence set foot in Hartnell’s clubhouse. Except for the additional trophies in the glass cabinets that lined the reception area, and a few more photographs between them, nothing had changed. The double doors to the bar were wide open to the blare of Christmas music. A sprig of plastic mistletoe hung from the centre of the doorframe. Beyond, multi-coloured fairy lights framed the windows and bar top, and to one side of the bar a large tree stood with presents beneath it. They weren’t fakes. The club always collected donated gifts for local children in need.

“That for me?”

Laurence wheeled around at the familiar voice, not quick enough to grab Aaron before he was grabbed and twirled off his feet.

“Mind! You’re crushing the present,” Laurence huffed with laughter. Then, after one delectable whiff, “You still wear the same aftershave.”

“Is that a good or bad thing?”

“It’s good. And no, this isn’t for you. Unless you’re a needy kid who likes Lego.”

Aaron released him and he looked... so pleased to see him. The feeling was absolutely, definitely mutual and Laurence immediately wished he’d come home a week sooner.

When Aaron smiled, Laurence’s eyes were drawn to the dimples in his cheeks. They were deeper than Laurence remembered them being. Perhaps because Aaron’s face had matured, lost some of its baby roundness. These new lines and contours had sharpened and accentuated his features, reminding

Laurence with startling clarity how good-looking Aaron was. One smile, he could have anyone he wanted. Tonight, he was Laurence's, whether for old time's sake or something more, Laurence wasn't sure. But he wanted to find out.

They walked into the bar, shoulder to shoulder, as if not a day had passed since they'd seen each other last.

"What are you drinking these days?" Aaron asked.

"Beer. Any draught."

Aaron's eyebrows went up. *Really?* Laurence took a pause for breath. "What? Did you think it would be some glitzy cocktail?"

Aaron shook his head. "I don't know. It's been a while. People's tastes change."

Laurence got the feeling Aaron was talking about more than drinks but he didn't get the chance to dwell on it. A couple of men at the bar that Laurence didn't recognise were greeting Aaron, and by the time they found a seat, at a small table in the corner, they'd had to stop by and say their hellos to at least a dozen people.

Aaron was at home here. It was his space. Laurence didn't belong anymore. As if to drive the point further, Aaron said, "How's university?"

"Good. I'm glad to be getting towards the end of it though."

"Any plans for after? I don't suppose you'll be coming back here?"

Waving to someone else who'd caught his eye from across the room, Aaron asked like he didn't care. Laurence hadn't expected that, not minutes into seeing him again after all this time. Guilt flared, sharp and hot in his chest. He couldn't lie.

"I'm thinking about doing a Master's degree. Not in Exeter. Somewhere more lively, like London. It's another year of education, but it should improve my paltry chances of finding a job."

Aaron looked him in the eye, intently, like he was searching. "The world's your oyster. I expect you'll be able to do anything you want, once you're done."

That was unlikely but it was nice to get the encouragement. "What about you?"

Their knees bumped together beneath the table, and Aaron flinched. He took a big mouthful of beer before he answered.

“I’ve got six months of my advanced apprenticeship left then I’ll be able to look for a job. Although I’m hoping I can stay on at Warwick’s. I’ve still got a lot to learn, and the owner’s all about passing on skills, proper skills, not just having someone to do all the boring work.”

“That’s great. What sort of things are you doing?”

“Mostly kitchens. Bespoke ones. We make everything in the workshop but sometimes I go out on site to help with the installation. You should see some of the houses these cabinets go to.”

Finally, Aaron was back to his old self, in his element. It was plain to see he enjoyed his work, which was pretty amazing. Not many people could say they loved their job.

“I wouldn’t mind coming to the workshop while I’m back, to see what you do.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

And there it was, that sparkle and glow. Aaron was gorgeous, handsome as ever. Laurence wanted to reach out and take his hand. Aaron was rubbing it on his thigh, presumably to dry it where his beer glass was wet with condensation. The tendons that ran from his fingers to his wrist looked stronger, more sinewy and his first two knuckles were scabbed. Thoughts of being held down, of rough calluses scraping over his skin had Laurence blushing. Hopefully it was too dark for Aaron to notice.

There was so much that Laurence wanted to talk about. Since the conversation had reached a natural pause, and he was already hot-cheeked, he dived straight in. “Are you seeing anyone?”

“No,” Aaron said bluntly. “What about you?”

“No. I’m single. There have been a few flings but never anything serious.”

Aaron looked... pleased. He said, “I’m not celibate, don’t get me wrong, but I’m busy. I haven’t had time...” He trailed off and circled the rim of his beer glass with his forefinger. “You’ve grown. Again.”

“I think I stopped last year. Six foot on the nose.”

With what felt like fondness, Aaron squeezed his bicep. "Been weight training?"

"A bit." Laurence grinned. "What's the matter? Worried I'm stronger than you?"

"No."

"Hey! Laurence!" It was Coach Martin. At least, it sounded like Coach Martin. This man looked ten years older and three stone lighter, and he'd lost his hair.

Laurence stood up and shook his hand. It was bony and his grip was weak. The man was ill, very ill. Laurence glanced over at Aaron, who shook his head, almost imperceptibly, and Laurence knew at once it was something serious.

"Looks like college has put some meat on your bones," Coach Martin said, either ignoring or oblivious to Laurence's shock. "What position are you playing now?"

"I'm not. I haven't played since I left here."

"Well we can put that to rights. You qualify for the Vets, now you've been gone two years. We could do with some young blood."

"I'm only back for Christmas."

"Perfect. There's a charity match on the twenty-first, Saturday before Christmas, against Brent. You can't have full back, but there's a spot on the flank."

"Are you playing?" Laurence asked Aaron.

"Yeah. But not for the Vets. We'll be on the next pitch."

Playing for the same side, but not on the same team. Laurence couldn't expect it to be otherwise. Not when he'd been gone so long. Probably for the best, anyway, given how out of shape he was.

The moment Coach Martin hobbled out of earshot, Aaron said, "Cancer. His bowel, I think."

"So that's why he's retiring. Poor man."

"I know. It won't be the same here once he's gone." Wistfully, he added, "Nothing stays the same, does it?"

Laurence didn't answer. The shock of seeing Coach Martin had derailed him. He'd been on his way to asking Aaron, out and out, once and for all. Was he gay? Bi? Out, in?

He didn't want to sound like the Inquisition, but he deserved to know. Taking another gulp of Dutch courage, Laurence braced himself—just as a group of his old teammates turned up. One of them, Paulie, went straight to the bar while Harry and Jed came over.

Once again, Laurence stood up, held out his hand and went through the usual greetings and updates.

Harry sat on the stool next to Aaron and said, "Mind if we join you?"

Aaron replied, "No. Why would we?"

Harry smirked. "Your boyfriend's back. Maybe this is a date. I don't know. Stupid place for a date, but then you two are the only gay rugby players I've ever met. What do I know?"

Laurence's heart missed a beat then caught up, as a fresh rush of blood pounded in his ears. So there was his answer. And he was pretty damned happy about it. If only he was in a position to show Aaron...

For two hours, Laurence had to sit through reminiscences and dirty jokes. Until, looking like he was teetering past tipsy, Aaron leaned over, put his head on Laurence's shoulder and said, "Come home with me?"

"Are you still at your Mum's?"

"Yeah."

"Won't she mind?"

"I don't think so. So long as we're not too noisy."

"All right. It'll be good to talk in the quiet, no interruptions."

"Talk?" Aaron looked like he was going to throw up.

Not caring who saw, Laurence closed his hand around Aaron's knee. "Yes, talk."

Not so many years ago, Laurence would have gone home with Aaron, no questions, and talking would have been the last thing on his mind. And he might have been up for some no-strings fun tonight, if it had been anyone else. But it wasn't anyone else. It was Aaron, his dear Aaron. They needed to talk.

It was time to step up and be a man. It was time to ask him. Ask him what, though? Couldn't they do better than this? Didn't Aaron want more than this? Because Laurence sure as hell did.

Seeing Aaron again, sitting beside him for these few short hours, it was crystal clear. There was no one else for Laurence, no one came close. And if that was too much for Aaron, well, they would always be friends. But Laurence couldn't do this casual hooking up thing, this not committing, not verbalising or sharing each other's lives.

They needed to talk about this together, both of them, because this pitiful one-sided conversation in Laurence's head was going nowhere.

Aaron made the call for a taxi, Laurence put on his coat and together they made their retreat. Or was it an advance? Laurence wasn't sure yet.

The cold night air crept over his collar and clawed at his back as they waited outside. A jarring shiver shook down the length of his spine. Aaron didn't hesitate to put his arm around his shoulders, like that was the normal and most natural thing to do. In turn, Laurence took a step closer to him and slid his arm around Aaron's waist. He didn't slot in beneath his shoulder like he used to. If Laurence moved to face him, he wouldn't have to tilt his face up to kiss Aaron. He'd only have to move his head to the side, lean in—

The taxi rolled in five minutes ahead of schedule. Given the sub-zero temperatures, Laurence ought to have been more grateful.

They rode back to Aaron's in silence, while Laurence pondered the events of the night so far, trying to work out how the balance of facts left him feeling.

All this time, Aaron had been out and hadn't told him. Laurence didn't know whether to be hurt or angry. It was hard to feel either with Aaron pressed up beside him, his fingers twisting knots in his coat.

Aaron's house was dark. "Mum's in bed. She's got a cold. Dosed up with Night Nurse, so don't worry, we won't disturb her."

They went straight to the kitchen, where Laurence discovered the addition of a small conservatory on the back of the house. Aaron put on the kettle then went out there, switched on a table lamp and the electric radiator. The room looked cosy even if Laurence felt the chill of night whoosh through the open door into the house.

Aaron looked nervous, like he was stalling. Sometimes it was hard to shut him up. He could natter on incessantly when the mood took him. Now was not

one of those times. He put a teabag in each cup and angled around Laurence to get to the fridge for the milk. "It'll soon warm up. We'll have more privacy in the conservatory."

"It's glass."

Aaron seemed to miss the lightness in Laurence's tone.

"Only one side is overlooked and they're in bed. No lights outside, see? But I'll pull the blinds down."

Laurence kept his jacket on as Aaron finished making their brew. He held back any hint of accusation from his voice to ask, "How long have you been out?"

Aaron didn't look up from the two mugs of tea, still on the worktop by the kettle. "My Mum said she knew before I did. I suppose when I started bringing you home it confirmed it."

Laurence didn't have the chance to show his surprise as Aaron went on, "After you left for university, I told Coach Martin. I was worried about how the other team members would take it. He said he'd always known, too. I don't think we were as good at hiding it as we thought we were."

"And it's been all right?"

"Yes. Mostly. Nothing I couldn't handle. Anyway, people at college knew as soon as I went there."

When Aaron was sixteen. Laurence was the last to know, then. He'd shared about every first with Aaron that counted, yet he was the last person to be told, officially, he was out. And by the sounds of it, proud. Finally, anger surfaced and it wouldn't subside. "Why did you never tell me?"

"You asked me once, not to tell anyone about you. Because you weren't ready. I didn't tell you about me because I didn't want you to follow me into coming out. It had to be when you were ready."

Aaron had been more mature than Laurence back then. It wasn't just Laurence's hair that had been like a puppy dog's. He would have followed Aaron anywhere, and where coming out was concerned, maybe resented him for it later.

And Aaron always said Laurence was the clever one.

It was a mistake, getting angry with Aaron. He'd done nothing to deserve it.

Relieved, because Laurence hadn't wanted an argument, far from it, he followed Aaron into the conservatory. It was heating up already and with Aaron next to him on the sofa, it was warm enough for Laurence to take off his coat. This time, he was the one to put his arm around Aaron, to pull him to his chest and hold him close.

"At the end of my first year at uni, when you came to see me, you knew I was out. Why didn't you tell me then?"

Aaron turned away and drew his knees up. Laurence didn't tell him he could see his reflection in the window, see his face drawn into a sad frown. He held him tighter and closer and kissed the back of his head until Aaron drew in a shaky breath and responded.

"It seemed pointless. I'd already lost you. Once I saw you there, I knew it was over. That I couldn't have you anymore."

"Why would you think that?"

Aaron sighed. His head dropped to his knees. "All those years, I'd been waiting for you to catch up with me. Then when I came to see you, I realised you'd moved on, past me. I felt left behind. You didn't need me anymore."

"Isn't wanting you enough?"

Aaron tightened in on himself further. It hurt to see him like this. Laurence couldn't bear it. He took Aaron by the shoulders and turned him around, even as he resisted, and pulled his legs over his lap so he could hold him properly. Kiss his mouth, his cheeks, his eyelids.

With Aaron's face in his hands, between kisses Laurence said, "I love you. I've loved you since, I don't know, since I was fifteen. And I know I've been away, but there's never been a day I didn't think about you. You're my best friend and you always will be. But I want you to be my boyfriend, too. Mine and no one else's. I don't want to fuck you, then say good-bye not knowing when I'm going to see you again."

Aaron looked like he was going to cry. He screwed his eyes shut and tried to cover his face with his hands. Laurence prised his fingers away and saw his eyes wet with unshed tears.

"Aaron? Please? Don't you want that too?"

Upset, vulnerable, he looked like a boy again, but not the boy Laurence remembered. Or maybe he did. Maybe Laurence just hadn't seen him that way then.

“I’m just a chippy. I’ve never read any fancy books.”

“And I’m just a bloke who’s about to get an English degree, which means I’ll either be unemployed in six months, or I’ll be delaying it another year while I get myself into more debt. I’d say, if you’re looking for someone with prospects, I’m not your man.”

“You’ve always been my man,” Aaron said before his face crumpled completely and the tears fell.

They stayed there all night, curled up on the sofa in the conservatory with the radiator on, Aaron cradled in Laurence’s arms. They didn’t do anything but hold each other, kissing and whispering endearments that meant only one thing—mine, mine, mine.

Epilogue

The Coleman house was in chaos. Pulling him up the stairs by the hand, Laurence retreated to his room with Aaron.

“No shenanigans, you two. We’re leaving in half an hour,” Lisa said, bustling down the hall in pale pink silk and strappy heels. Laurence doubted she’d make it as far as the reception without changing into plimsolls.

He shut his door and took a long, lingering look at Aaron, dapper in dove-grey.

“You look stunning. Here, just let me straighten this.” Laurence took the pin out of Aaron’s buttonhole and moved the pink carnation until it lay in line with his lapel.

Louise had insisted that Aaron join the men in morning suits, and that he usher at the church. She’d pointed out to Laurence over two bottles of Pinot that he and Aaron had been together longer than any of them, on and off—seven years. In her infinite wisdom as bride-to-be, she’d also predicted they would be next tying the knot, now it was legal.

Laurence didn’t know about that. It was early days yet. Early, new, good... amazing.

His phone rang as Aaron was running his fingers through the curls he’d let lengthen over the last six months. Aaron had asked and Laurence wouldn’t refuse him anything, not when he asked for so little but needed so much.

“Don’t get it, Laurie. I want you to myself for a few minutes.”

Okay, he’d refuse him nothing except this, because, “I have to get it. It’s Marv’s friend—”

Laurence didn’t explain further and took the call. When he hung up, he took Aaron in his arms and was gifted a beatific smile. If it stayed sunny, if Louise got to the church on time, if his Dad didn’t stammer during his speech, still this day wouldn’t be more perfect.

“What?” Aaron looked away, fiddled with his flower—which explained how it had got crooked the last time.

“Do you remember I said that Marv’s friend’s brother has a design studio in Notting Hill, making kitchens, bedrooms, dining furniture and all that?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I sent him pictures of some of your work and he wants to meet you.”

“Hang on. I said I’d think about it. I told you, I’ve only just finished my apprenticeship. I’m not sure I’m ready.”

Laurence remembered what it had cost Aaron, when *he* hadn’t been ready, but this was different. “I know. I told him all that. And all he wants you to do is meet him. You can look around the studio, see if you like what they do. It’s worth a look, surely? You could be in London with me. We could rent a shitty studio and live like paupers and I’ll make you potato salad while you go carve fancy corbels.”

“Corbels? Since when did you know what a corbel is?”

“I don’t know. You pick it up, when you have a boyfriend who’s a master craftsman.”

“I’m not—”

“Not yet. But you will be.”

“Will you come with me?”

“Like you needed to ask.”

Aaron pulled Laurence close and kissed him. There was noise downstairs, the busy noise of love and laughter. It echoed all around the house.

Laurence had thought he would wait but he couldn’t. Kissing Aaron, in his old bedroom on his sister’s wedding day. This was the right moment. “Before we go, I’ve got something for you.”

When Aaron opened the bag, he laughed. When he looked at the engraving on the plaque of the trophy that Laurence had won after the last game he played for Hartnell, his face softened into a tender smile.

Aaron Ford, Man of the Match

Laurence looked into Aaron’s soft brown eyes. “I always thought it should have been yours.”

Aaron brushed his thumb over the engraving. “We could put it on the mantelpiece of our shitty bedsit.”

“What if we don’t have a mantelpiece?”

“Then I’ll make us one.”

There was a call from downstairs. Something about having a wedding to go to. They straightened out their jackets and regarded each other for a long moment.

Aaron's carnation had slipped again. But this time Laurence left it exactly where it was.

The End

Author Bio

Lane Swift currently lives by the sea in Hampshire, England. Aside from looking after her family, she writes stories with romantic happy-ever-afters.

Over the years, she's worked as a waitress, a lab technician, a science teacher and a telecommunications consultant.

When she was younger, she played field hockey then rugby. Nowadays she's a fair-weather runner though she's more likely to exercise by cycling or walking, preferably via the pub.

Lane also likes to make stuff, especially knitted stuff, and potter about in her garden.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Twitter](#)

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MARKETING BEEF

By Rick Bettencourt

Photo Description

Photo is an advertisement for an oversized hot dog smothered in mustard and hanging a bit over the side of its bun. To the right of it, in white-lettering are the words, "I'm stretched and ready. Let's do this." The ad continues, "New Footlong Quarter Pound Coney."

Story Letter

Dear Author,

*So, one day during lunch, I was walking and just happened to look up and saw this billboard. It cracked me up. But I didn't think much of it; it made me laugh and thought that was it. Well, I saw another one the next week, and the week after that, and well, you get the picture. I was all, man, did the advertising world get a sense of humor all of a sudden? Then it hit me, all these billboards had one thing in common, these are my accounts in our ad agency. Obviously I wasn't the one that were coming up with these one-liners because I'm not that oblivious, come on now, give me some credit! They were the accounts that I was handling the accounting for. Yes, I am an accountant for an ad agency. But I really keep to myself. I mean, I smile and say hi to people when they say good morning but I don't go to bars after work to socialize if you get what I mean. I am a pretty happy guy, no drama really, but maybe a bit lonely. My last relationship ended in college and I get attached easily so there hasn't been anyone for a very long time. Am I making too much out of these billboards? I thought I was until one day, I saw one that was directly addressed to me... it was quite clever because they managed to work my name on it and the ad was freaking hilarious but it was like a **BIG HELLO**. Those **WERE** for me but who? How are they getting away with them? Why do they want my attention? And really, **WHO WOULD DO THAT FOR LITTLE OLE ME?***

*Hi, dearest author, as you can see, I would love lots of humor, lots of **EPISTOLARY** elements (those are in caps because **PLEASE, PLEASE, CAN I HAVE SOME?**), and generally just a feel good, **HEA** story. I want to smile and laugh when I read your story!*

Thanks so much,

Rissa

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: humor, tender, journal, ad agency, accountant, job loss, betrayal, self-growth

Content Warnings: Like a good relationship, the sex is worth the wait. It comes. I promise.

Word Count: 32,297

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MARKETING BEEF

By Rick Bettencourt

Chapter One

Dear Journal:

Last night, I took a bath with Mr. Bubbles. I haven't done that in years but I was sore from my workout. It felt good.

This morning I ate a bowl of granola, a banana, and a glass of pomegranate juice. (I'll have to log this in my spreadsheet when I get home.)

Oh, I also walked Mrs. Johnson's dog from 5:30 a.m. to about 6:00 a.m.

What else?

God, am I really that boring? (Please don't answer that.)

It's just that... that... Oh, I don't know!

Okay, today marks the seventh anniversary of Gary and me splitting up. It's not that it's a bad thing. I'm glad we're no longer together.

It's just that... seven years! Who... What have I done during that time?

All right, I'm not going to get myself depressed. I need to focus on my accomplishments. And there have been many.

Evan Capri McCormick's Septenary Achievements:

Obtained job at Thoroughbred Marketing and recently vested with five years of service.

Promoted to senior accountant with a 15% increase in salary—after only three years!

Removed dairy from my diet and have no more indigestion. (Thank God!)

Bought the house in Conant for 50% below (the Great Recession) market value. (And through scrimping, saving, making accelerated payments, and a rebound of the economy, I have over \$285,000 in equity.)

Increased chest measurement by ~5% (note: check BMI spreadsheet tonight for exact proportions).

Increased pushups from ~35 per minute to ~55 (also check values in spreadsheet for exact time span... believe it was 10% per year).

Decreased number of times I masturb...

“Hey, Evan.”

I slammed shut my leather Moleskine and looked up.

“Looks like accountant-boy is working through lunch again,” said Madeline, from Account Services. She was out for her lunchtime walk.

I pulled a folder out from under my lunch tote. “Oh, hey Madeline.” I slid out the company’s revenue report and glanced at it. I didn’t want to get into any small talk but she had a way of getting me chatting.

“All work, no play,” she said, now standing with her hands on her hips in front of me. She was wearing some pink and black, tight-fitting gym outfit. She looked like a black raspberry ice cream cone, her well-endowed chest being scoops of dairy, which I now avoid. “At least you’re out in the sunshine, instead of eating at your desk like you usually do.”

I chuckled and fidgeted a bit. Leaning back on the park bench, I held up a hand to shield the sun. “Nice day, huh?” I wasn’t very good at striking up a conversation.

“It is, Evan. It is.” She looked out toward the river behind me. “Well, I’m going to walk off my spinach salad,” she said, without moving. She looked down at me.

“Enjoy.” I pushed up the bridge of my brown-rimmed glasses, hoping to get rid of her, and studied the report in my lap, *Thoroughbred Marketing, Inc. EBITDA Report*.

She huffed. “I’ll let you get back to your numbers.”

I looked up again, but she already had her back to me and was waving to Jenny, the blonde, from Human Resources. “See ya,” I said but I don’t think she heard me.

Madeline Alvarez was an attractive, single woman about my age, early thirties. I don't think she suspected I was gay. In fact, I would say many of my office colleagues knew zilch about me. I pretty much kept to myself.

I took the last bite from my ham and tomato sandwich and thumbed through the EBITDA. My journal could wait. "Hmm. The fund account is off again," I mumbled to myself.

I could have read the report at my desk but after a week of gloomy New England rain, outside was a welcome respite.

After a few minutes of reviewing numbers, I pulled my journal out from under my thigh, where I had shoved it when Madeline approached. Its pages were nearly full. *Need to go to Barnes soon and pick out a new one.*

I threw my water bottle in my tote, packed up my briefcase and got up from the bench. As I walked the graveled sidewalk back to the office, I heard a commotion over by Lynch Street.

Madeline and Jenny, along with a handful of other people from the office, had congregated near the billboard that hung across from the Stop & Shop. I knew the sign well. Over the years, the firm had leased many spots on it. In fact, I was the one who had measured the potential advertisement yield based on variables such as traffic patterns, time of year and demographics for the surrounding neighborhood.

I walked closer to them. From inside the park, it was hard to see what they were looking at. As I approached, there was chuckling and shaking of heads.

"Did we lose the Yankee account?" Sam, from IT, asked another colleague.

I looked up at the advertisement. "Wow." Yankee Neighborhood Beef Co. had been one of our biggest clients, but we had seen revenue from them dip recently.

"We didn't do it," I heard someone else say. "I would know. I would have seen it come across my desk."

I looked back at our little crowd. There were a few more spectators joining our assembly, even shoppers from the grocery store across the way were staring at us and then up at the sign.

Madeline looked behind me, toward the office. "Shh. Don't look now but here comes Dave."

I turned. Dave was the head of Creative and pretty much had his hand in every piece of copy written by the firm. Behind him were a couple of his team members, including the guy I had a little thing for. His name was Dillon.

Dillon Deiss was known around Boston as a hotshot copywriter. The firm hired him about three or four months prior. He and Peter—a colleague of his from Corridor, our competitor in Boston—were hired around the same time.

The three of them walked across the parking lot, but my eyes were locked on Dillon. His suit jacket blew back, and the buttoned shirt he wore revealed a bit of skin beneath. I gasped audibly and then quickly looked around to make sure no one had heard me. I scratched my ear and cleared my throat to cover my reaction.

I tried to look away, but I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was smiling and chatting with Peter. The sheen on Dillon's gray suit suggested it could only have been made from the finest of material. What, I wouldn't know. I've never been much into fashion. "On clearance" was the only qualifier I used in purchasing my clothes. His light blue shirt was opened at the collar and hugged a toned torso. Underneath it I imagined a solid set of pecs and firm abs that no doubt rivaled mine.

I touched my stomach and looked away. I was afraid I was becoming too obvious. Dillon looked polished. His outfit probably cost more than the new set of tires I had recently thrown on my Explorer.

He was probably a couple of inches shorter than me—not that I would have really known. We hadn't stood close enough to tell. He had thick, dirty-blond hair. The type that would stand on end when he got it cut short, like he had a few weeks back. I had admired the square cut neckline of his new haircut while he was walking down the hallway to the cafeteria.

My hair was a couple of shades darker than his but didn't look good short. I kept it on the long side, which meant it was forever falling in my eyes and needing to be tamed with a comb or even a baseball cap.

As Dillon approached the gathering, he smiled at me. I tightened up and averted my eyes downward. My briefcase's strap fell off my shoulder, and I yanked it back up.

He and Peter stood next to me and looked up at the advertisement.

He smiled at me? No. He doesn't even know you exist. That was just a courtesy. I was forever having internal conversations with myself; a result, no doubt, of living alone for so many years.

He put his hands in his pants pockets, and his suit coat draped behind his forearms. “Not bad,” he said studying the sign. He turned to Peter and said, borrowing from the billboard’s slogan, “Never underestimate the power of advertising.”

Peter chuckled and nudged Dave, their boss. “It’s got to be Corridor,” he said, eyes still trained on the billboard. “Dick, my old boss over there, has a bit of a phallic fixation.”

Dillon laughed. His teeth were as white as my shirt. He caught my eye and quickly looked away.

Oh, God. He saw you staring at him. Quick! Look at the billboard, you fool!
I looked up.

The advertisement displayed a woman standing in a kitchen. Shiny copper pots dangled from a pan rack above her. In her hands, she held a large piece of kielbasa. One hand grasped the tip of it and her left eyebrow was raised. Behind her a man and two teenage boys—presumably her husband and children—sat at the kitchen island. They were a little out of focus but were whooping it up, apparently joking around while waiting for dinner. Underneath her was the text:

Never underestimate the power of the sausage.

Madeline pointed back toward the office. Mr. Whitfield, the firm’s president—with his head of stark white hair—stood in his office window, taking in the scene. The crowd dispersed.

Jonathan William Whitfield, CEO

Thoroughbred Marketing Inc.

1150 Beacon St.

Beverly, MA 01915

Dear Mr. Whitfield,

I am writing to inform you of some concerns I have regarding the firm’s finances.

As senior accountant at Thoroughbred, I have been monitoring the investment portfolio for nearly three years. As such, I have watched the Firkins Fiduciary Fund (FFFX) balloon to unprecedented highs. A 650% average return is—as I’m sure

you know—unheard of in such an investment vehicle. I realize this high yield has provided the firm the ability to expand and offer many perks to the staff, from which even I have benefited. However, I feel it is my duty to...

I rolled my office chair back and nearly hit the wall on the opposite end of my small, makeshift home office. “Uh! I can’t send this.” I spun around. “Especially in writing.” It was getting late. I stretched. “Something like this needs to be done face-to-face.”

I stood up, turned off the desk lamp, grabbed my mug of water, and headed to the bedroom. “Face-to-face, by someone other than me.”

The light from the summer moon shone through the window and cast a couple of squares from the windowpanes onto my bedroom floor. I pulled off my T-shirt, threw it on the scatter rug, climbed into my bed, and pulled up the comforter.

I lay there awhile with my eyes open, hands locked behind my head. I looked at the journal, lighted by the moon’s glow on my nightstand. I had finished the day’s entry, adding to my list of achievements.

The air conditioner clicked on. The wall vent by the master bathroom blew, and the window curtains on the other side of the room started to sway.

I watched the gentle fluttering of the sheer curtains and thought about my accomplishments. *There was no relationship on that list.* I got up and went over to the window to look out at the lake. The house was so secluded I didn’t worry about anyone seeing me dressed only in a pair of blue boxer briefs. Nor did I care that anyone could see the large wine-stained birthmark I had over my upper body. No one saw that.

I took in the beauty of the lake. The moon’s reflection glistened upon it. “A shimmering dance,” I said. It was how my mother described the lakes in Michigan when we would go camping.

My view of the water—now that I had one after cutting back all the dead brush—was one of the reasons I had bought the house. It reminded me of my childhood.

Conant Lake, as it was commonly referred to, was really an oversized pond. But the name stuck. It was fed by various rivers and streams coming out of the much larger Wenham Lake to its north.

I stood there, mesmerized by the moon dance, for what felt like hours, while I thought about my childhood, my mother's death, my move to Massachusetts for school and ultimately meeting, and separating from, Gary.

"It's hard to believe it's been seven years," I thought aloud. "Seven years and practically no one else." There had been a couple of one night stands—actually, exactly two.

Gary and I split up the summer after we graduated from Salem State. Apparently, to him, our little college romance was something akin to a series of "dorm biffs" and being really good friends. I had been eyeing apartments for us to move into together, while he was enjoying Boston's nightlife.

During that summer, he got a job with a high-profile law firm that liked his economics and legal background, and so he moved to Boston. He found a boyfriend who was a lot more muscular than I—and, I'm sure, didn't have a birthmark swashed across his chest.

The hoot of an owl shook me from my reverie. I looked up and spotted the Big Dipper, followed its base up to the North Star, and then to the Little Dipper. I still remembered star navigation from Boy Scouts.

I went and sat back down on the bed, turned on the lamp, took my now full journal from the top of the nightstand and thumbed through it. I liked the feel of the weighted pages, and its fullness felt like an achievement.

I opened the bottom drawer, placed the journal on top of all my others, and selected an old one at random.

I took the job with Thoroughbred Marketing! I just got off the phone. I might be able to get that old summer cottage in Conant after all.

I thumbed through some more.

I've decided to put the data related to my workout routines, calorific intake and finances in a spreadsheet, instead of clogging up my journal with numbers. Plus, it'll allow me to run better analyses...

The original intent of my journals had been to log my physical fitness and finances. But as they morphed, I found the writing part, not just logging of numbers, to be the most rewarding. The facts were better tracked elsewhere.

I flipped to another page.

I spent a good part of the day clearing brush and cutting back overgrown trees in the backyard. I felt a bit like Thoreau. Later, I went for a hike around the lake and happened upon a loon's nest. And I met a neighbor, an older lady named Ann Johnson. She lives on the opposite end of the lake. With the brush cut, I can now make out the tip of her cottage. Her dog, Detritus, is cool. Her husband died years ago. She lives alone too and said we should...

I leafed to the back of the journal.

By couponing, making my own lunches and not eating out, I've added an extra \$100 a month to my debt payoff fund. At this rate, I'll be mortgage free in only five more years. At that point, I'll be able to...

I threw the journal back into the drawer, closed it with my foot, shut off the light, and lay back down. I put my hands behind my head again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the bulge of my bicep. It was bigger than when I had split with Gary. I had certainly achieved a better body. I looked down at my chest. In the moon's glow I could still make out my birthmark, the large wine-stained swath across my left breast. I tightened my abs and let out a sigh.

I turned toward the empty pillow beside me and went to sleep.

Chapter Two

I pushed the button for the third floor. I normally would have taken the stairs, but I was running a little late for the meeting. The elevator doors closed.

I took in a deep breath and let it out. I was a little nervous. I hated board meetings. I didn't usually have to attend them but every once in a while I got asked to present some charts and explain a few figures to the higher ups. "This one should be no different from the others." I fidgeted with the spiral binding on my notebook. "You'll be fine."

The doors opened, and I rushed down the hall to try and make it before old man Whitfield got there. No one wanted to show up after the CEO.

"Shit," I muttered, as I hurried past HR and saw his head of full white hair over the top of Cynthia Hanford's cubicle. I dodged down her row to try and cut him off and get to the conference room before he did.

I caught Madeline Alvarez's eye, and she turned to Whitfield. "Good afternoon, Mr. Whitfield," she said. "How are you today?"

I neared the printer called Salem. We named our copy and print stations after North Shore cities and towns.

"Oh, Ms. Alvarez, just splendid, thank you," Mr. Whitfield said. I could see him pausing by her cubicle.

Madeline, I owe you.

"Well," Mr. Whitfield said, "isn't that a pretty new plant you have?"

"It's a New Guinea," Madeline said and winked at me.

I slinked around Salem.

"Ah, new what?" I heard him say.

"A NEW GUINEA."

"Yes, I know Ginny," Mr. Whitfield said. "Poor thing."

I ducked into the conference room and heard him start to explain Ginny, the marketing manager's illness to Madeline.

I took a seat next to Barry from Sales. He moved over a little. A few minutes later, in walked Mr. Whitfield.

“Good morning, Mr. Whitfield,” said the group, nearly in unison.

A bunch of brown-nosers.

Mr. Whitfield nodded, shuffled over to the head of the table, and sat down.

Peggy, the head of Operations, started the PowerPoint presentation. The pitch was a monthly update on the various goings-on within the agency. I, thankfully, didn't have to say much. I was there mainly to answer questions and speak about one slide on the financials in my boss' absence.

Peggy was two slides into the presentation—a section about a new client in New Hampshire—when Dillon Deiss slipped into the room and slowly shut the door behind him. He was wearing a stunning, teal suit and had gel in his hair that made it look wet... and sexy.

Mr. Whitfield turned and glared at him.

The room fell silent.

“Mr. Deiss,” Whitfield said, “how nice of you to join us.”

Everyone giggled. I kept my eyes on my notes.

“I'm sorry, sir,” Dillon said and started over toward me and the only available chair. I was glad he offered no lame excuse, like the elevator being slow or his Outlook not reminding him.

Mr. Whitfield watched him sit and then nodded to Peggy who continued with her outline of the New Hampshire client—a pool company in the summer, landscaping in the fall and snowplowing in the winter. As we had learned prior to Dillon's entrance, the firm was yet to come up with a catchy slogan, a new name, and a radio spot.

Whitfield turned our way and cleared his throat. His eyes were enormous through the thick lenses of his black-rimmed glasses, and his threatening gaze settled on Dillon. “You listen to Kiss 108 radio, Mr. Deiss?” he interrogated.

Dillon fidgeted in his seat. He had been pulling some notes from a folder and, from the looks of his blank stare, hadn't been listening. He looked at the presentation on the screen. Peggy had moved on to another slide.

Section II: Financials

“Um.” Dillon scratched behind his ear.

I slowly turned my back to Whitfield, leaned into my hand and whispered to Dillon, “We're picking up a New Hampshire pool, landscaping and plow company. They want a spot on Kiss 108.”

Dillon grinned at me and looked back to Mr. Whitfield. “Yes, sir,” he said. “I do happen to listen to the station. I think their demographics would work well with New Hampshire Pool, Landscaping and Snow’s needs.”

Mr. Whitfield’s head quivered a bit. “The what?” he barked.

Dillon repeated himself.

Mr. Whitfield took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “I like it.” He nodded and put his glasses back on. “New Hampshire Pool, Landscaping and Snow. Good name.”

Dillon’s Adam’s apple gulped.

Mr. Whitfield threw in another throat-clear, which Peggy jerked at. “It’s a simple name,” he added. “But it’s what they do.” He motioned to Peggy for her to go back a few slides. “Wait, wait... one more. That one!” Mr. Whitfield pointed and then took a moment to re-read the slide.

Dillon jotted down a note and pushed his legal pad my way.

THANKS!

My pulse quickened. And I smiled and nodded.

Peggy adjusted the lapels of her red suit jacket. “They go by McLaughlin & Son now.” She looked over to Dillon. “It doesn’t really speak to what they do. I like the idea of adding New Hampshire to their name, since it is their locale.”

“Me too,” Mr. Whitfield said. “We may need to shorten it a bit but, Mr. Deiss, I like the suggestion.”

“Well...” Dillon started, and looked to me, “it was actually not—”

I shook my head. I felt like he was going to say it was my idea, and I didn’t want the credit or to explain.

Dillon went on without taking his eyes from me, “It wasn’t my best impression but it’s a start.”

Mr. Whitfield waved his hand at Peggy. “All right. Let’s proceed.”

“Hey, buddy. Wait up,” Dillon said, from behind me. I knew it was him by the smoky tone of his voice.

I was just about to open the stairwell door, but instead I turned around, feeling a tightening deep inside me.

He smiled. "Evan, thanks." He walked at a hurried pace toward me. The pages of his legal pad flapped with each step.

I propped the door open with my back. *He knows my name?* I tried to think back to the meeting to see if they had mentioned me by name.

Dillon leaned into me and pushed the door open more. "You saved my ass in there."

I nearly fell into the stairwell but caught myself. "Oh, no problem." I started toward the stairs, my head down.

He bumped my arm with his elbow. "Hey, if you're not doing anything tonight..." he said and then threw his head back with a soft laugh. "God, that came out wrong. It sounds like I'm going to ask you out."

I stopped with my hand on the rail and looked up at him. I swallowed and then grinned nervously.

"What I was going to say," he said, shutting the door, "is that a couple of us are getting together after work tonight, for a beer over at Sylvan Street."

Sylvan Street was a pub over by the mall. A lot of people from the office liked to hang out there. I only went when it was for a company function.

I picked at my notebook's spiral binding. "Oh, um, thank you but I have plans tonight." The clip on my pen sprung free and it fell to the floor. I bent down to grab it but Dillon beat me to it. As we started back up, we stopped in awkward silence with our faces inches apart. He handed me the pen, and I nodded in gratitude.

He eyed the exit to the second floor. "Too bad you can't come..." He blushed and looked back at me. "...t-tonight. I owe you a beer." He walked down a few more steps to the landing and stopped at the door. "Rain check?" he suggested.

I went down another step, stopped to look back at him, and was momentarily thrown by what I saw. His crew-cut blond hair, brown eyes, and taut waist reminded me of an actor I had a crush on from one of the soap operas my mother used to watch. I repeatedly clicked my pen. "Sure." I smiled.

He opened the door to the second floor, winked at me and left.

I stood there for a moment. *Did he just wink at me?*

He did.

A few steps down, doubt kicked in. *No, he was just being friendly. After all, Evan, you can be rather gullible.*

That night, after twenty minutes of core-strengthening planks, push-ups, and body extensions, I headed out for a jog. I was wearing the blue Adidas shorts I'd picked up at T.J.Maxx. I had them on over a pair of black spandex compression shorts, which helped to keep everything from bouncing around down there. I would love to jog shirtless but... the wine stain.

I locked the house, threw the key under the mat, and headed out onto my little dead-end street for some cardio. I didn't like to measure miles. I preferred timing myself instead. I clicked on my stopwatch and started at a slow pace.

By the time I got to the end of the road, I was jogging at a good clip. Mrs. Johnson, my elderly neighbor, was out weeding her flower garden. She waved. "Go get 'em, Evan!"

"Hi, Mrs. Johnson!" I waved back. Despite her eccentricities—hundreds of cheesy paintings of Conant Lake—there was something about her I liked.

A dog barked behind the fence of the Matthews' home, which used to be a small cottage—similar to mine—but had since been bulldozed and a much larger colonial built in its place.

The cool, dusk air felt good. The perspiration from my core-strengthening workout helped to cool me down as the wind whipped past. My nipples chafed against the inside of my T-shirt. I checked for a spot of blood on my shirt like last time, but there was none.

I turned the corner onto Cedar Street and jogged a little longer, 'til I got to the town line of Wenham. There, I started sprint cycles. I went all-out for thirty seconds, stopped for ten, and repeated. This went on for several rounds, 'til I was panting and drenched in sweat.

With my hands on my haunches, I stopped to catch my breath about a mile down the road from my street. It started to rain. I headed back in a slow jog.

The rain felt good, except for it slushing around inside my sneakers. As I made my way back, I thought about Dillon. A car like his passed me. I had visions of it pulling over, him coming out with an umbrella, and giving me a ride home where we would...

Alas, no rescue.

When I got closer to the Conant town line, I could see the highway in the distance. There was another Yankee Neighborhood Beef Company ad near the on-ramp. I stopped.

Don't let your meat loaf.

I chuckled.

The billboard had a picture of a rather handsome man, shirtless under an apron. He was holding a delicious looking meatloaf in front of him and wearing a pair of oven mitts. The Yankee logo was imprinted to the right. A woman, who looked similar to the model from the other ad, sat in the background at a table. She fondled the petals of a long-stemmed rose in a vase in front of her.

Chapter Three

The Barnes & Noble at the North Shore Mall was always a little crowded on Saturdays. I was sipping a black coffee in the café, reviewing my planned purchases. I had picked out a nice leather-bound journal to start my new entries. The one I wanted from Moleskine was discontinued.

Beside the journal were several books I had gathered to peruse to while away a rainy summer afternoon.

Harry Potter. I never did read the last one.

There was a book on native New England plants that caught my attention. It was written by a lady I had seen speak at an Environmental Defense Fund conference.

I had shoved a book called *Biological Exuberance*, about homosexuality in nature, in the middle of my stack. I looked over my shoulder and slid it out, cracked it open, and sipped my coffee.

I read about this tribe of monkeys, the bonobos, who were gayer than the Village People. Bonobos were a horny bunch and, as of recent, I could relate.

By the time I had nearly finished my coffee, I felt more bonobo than human. *Maybe I just need to have sex more often.*

I put *Biological Exuberance* down, rubbed my eyes and combed back my hair with my hands. I thought about heading home, but it was still raining. I looked over at the magazine section, near the entrance. *Maybe I should grab a copy of Economy Today.*

The automatic doors parted and in walked a hot set of legs wearing khaki shorts, topped by a tight T-shirt speckled from the rain and a Red Sox baseball cap. The bonobo in me began to rise.

As the man shook the rain off, removing his cap in the process, I sat up. "Holy shit," I muttered. It was Dillon Deiss.

A lady sitting next to me looked up from her book; she glanced over at Dillon and then back to me.

I cleared my throat and took a sip of the cold remnants of my coffee.

The lady went back to her book, and I back to Dillon.

Who would have thought he could look just as hot dressed down as gussied up for work? The way his dirty-blond hair stuck out from under his cap made me smile. He looked ten years younger. He walked toward the cash register and asked the clerk something. The khakis contoured his buns perfectly.

My inner bonobo was rearing its... head. The small of Dillon's back formed the bottom of a V-shape, supporting a pair of broad shoulders that were not overly muscular. Just right, the way I liked them. I couldn't believe it, but I was becoming aroused. I fidgeted in my seat. These days, it didn't take much for me to get excited. I had been holding back on... pleasuring myself—another one of my supposed accomplishments that I chalked up to having gained better control of my impulses.

Evan, stop!

The clerk, a tall, lanky boy most likely just out of high school, laughed as he talked to Dillon. I raised an eyebrow. He then pointed to the back of the store, and Dillon went in that direction. The clerk watched him walk away.

As if on instinct, I started to get up to chase after Dillon but then I realized the predicament in my pants and quickly sat back down. *Where the hell do you think you're going, anyway?*

I pulled out the plant book, thinking it would divert my arousal.

What are you? A teenager?

It continued to throb and was at full mast.

I took a sip of cold coffee. "Dead nuns, dead nuns," I muttered, trying to think of something awful to distract my libido. After a few seconds thinking about bloodied habits, the tightness in my jeans subsided. I breathed a sigh of relief and pushed back my chair. *I should just buy the journal and leave.*

"Evan," said that alluring voice.

I jerked around. Another audible sigh. I felt my face flush.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you," he said. He was holding a book called *Signs of Opportunity*. "You weren't leaving, were you?"

Yes. "No! Not at all." My hand pointed toward the seat next to me, offering it up. *What are you doing?*

He pulled it out and sat down. With a scuff or two, I dragged my chair back in before the thing in my pants decided to reappear.

Dillon smiled. "So... you come here often?" His smile quickly vanished, and he blushed. He took off his cap and ran a hand through his hair. "Dude, I didn't mean it like..." He scraped his face with his hand and looked over his shoulders. "Sounds like another fucking come-on."

I chuckled. "That's okay." *It is?* "And, as a matter of fact, I do come here often."

He went on to tell me that this was his first time at the Peabody store. I just watched his lips and mouth move, barely hearing a word. He continued on about the store in Boston's Downtown Crossing. I got lost in the softness of his brown eyes, which in the light had just a hint of green.

"They sell ice cream and sushi now," he said, through those pearly whites.

I arched my brow, and my mind wandered again as he rambled on. It was odd, but it was as if I felt this inner tug toward him. The tightness *down there* returned.

I shook off the reverie. *For God's sake. What, are we in high school? Enough with the spontaneous erections.*

"You have one?" he asked.

I coughed and quickly rewound the memory banks to recall his question: something about everyone having a Kindle or a Nook. "I do," I said, "but I don't use it often."

"Is it full-size?" he asked holding out his hand in measurement.

I blinked. "It's decent."

He nodded. "You'll have to show me someday."

We stared for a moment. I think my mouth was agape. He opened his book and began to read.

I pushed my stack of books away. I was afraid the page opened at the horny bonobos would send the wrong impression. "What are you here for?" I asked.

He held up his book. "For work. Got to keep the ol' noggin up-to-date. A friend of mine back in Seattle recommended it."

I rubbed my hand along my pant leg. "Seattle? Is that where you're from?" *A little small talk won't kill you.*

He looked up from the book. "I am. Born and raised just outside of Tacoma, Washington, in a town called Renton."

I picked at the denim bunched at my knee. "I heard it's nice there." *You have?*

He thumbed through his book and put it down on the opened pages. "Washington's not bad. But I like it better here." He turned around, looking thoughtfully at the ordering area. He got up, rubbing his stomach. I saw a hint of flesh under his T-shirt. "You want anything? I'm starved."

I pointed to my mug. "Oh, no. I just had some coffee." I tipped the cup toward me. "Thank you, though."

He leaned over, took my empty mug and went over to the counter.

I watched him walk away. *Evan Capri McCormick. Stop ogling.* But I couldn't help it. That damn tug was pulling me in again. The way his butt filled his shorts, the soft-looking hair on his legs, his thick calf muscles, the fitted cap hugging the back of his head. "Dillon," I said, and he turned. *Oh my God. I said his name out loud!* I faked a cough. *You're a hot fucking mess.*

"You need something?" Dillon asked. He was next in line.

"Oh, no. I'm good." *You're a fool. Control yourself.*

Dillon ordered. He reached into his back pocket to get out his wallet and then into his front pocket for change. My mind flashed to a naughty image of what might be in those pants. *Don't let your meat loaf.* I looked down at my crotch and crossed my legs. I was at full mast again.

"Hey, Evan," Dillon said. "You don't happen to have an extra one, do you?"

"Um."

He stood there waiting. The guy behind him looked at his watch.

The cashier put down two coffees and Dillon took them.

Two coffees?

She put out some sort of pastry.

"You mind?" Dillon said with a flick of his head, motioning me to come over.

With the palm of my hand, I pushed my erection down, wincing. I tried to confine it against my inner thigh, tucked away as best I could. *This is the height of embarrassment.*

I got up, staying bent at the waist, and winced again.

Dillon met me halfway. “Thanks, man.”

I handed him a one from my wallet, took a coffee, and walked, bonobo-like, back to the table.

“You all right?” he asked as I sat down.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. “Oh, just hurt my back a little.”

“Oh, dude, sorry. That sucks.” He went back to the counter, grabbed the pastry and rejoined me at the table.

Dead nuns, dead nuns, dead nuns.

“I got you a refresh. I thought you’d like a little more caffeine,” he said.

I couldn’t look him in the eye. “Well, thank you,” I said to his shoulder. “You didn’t have to.”

He looked behind him, where I had been staring, and then back at me. “But I still owe you a beer. A promise is a promise.”

I snickered nervously. “All right.” *Oh my God. You’re a fucking case. No wonder you’re single.*

He cut the pastry—a muffin of sorts—in half, took one and pushed the plate toward me. “Have some.”

I held up a hand. “Oh, no. I’m good.”

He leaned his head back and dropped a few granola crumbs he had pulled off the top of the muffin into his mouth. He looked back at me. “I’m sorry.” He covered his mouth with the back of his hand. “I haven’t eaten all day. I’m ravenous.”

“That’s fine.” *Was I staring again?*

“You avoid empty calories. Good man. Now I know how you keep your hot...” He turned red, cleared his throat and looked down. He pinched off some more muffin. “Now I know how you keep your fit body.”

He just said I was hot.

There was an awkward silence.

I’m hot?

“So what are you reading?” he asked and pulled the bonobo book from my table.

Oh God! “Oh, nothing. That stack was here when I sat down.”

He looked over at me and frowned. “You come to a bookstore and don’t look at books?”

I grabbed the journal and held it up. “I was here for a journal and a cup of coffee.”

He nodded. “So you’re a writer?” He pulled the plate closer to him.

“Not really. I just use it for record keeping.” I picked at the cardboard that the journal was wrapped in. I wasn’t good with this casual conversation thing, and this was getting a little too personal.

He leaned back in his chair. I could see his nipples protruding through his shirt. He patted his stomach. “I don’t mean to be scoffing down in front of you.” He pushed his plate away. “It’s very rude.”

“No, it’s not.” I took a piece of his muffin and ate it.

He smiled and wiped his mouth with his thumb and forefinger. “I’m glad I came.”

When I got home, I whipped off my shirt and stripped out of my jeans. I cranked out fifty pushups, did five minutes of planks, and a round of body extensions, before going back to another set of pushups. Vigorous exercise helped me burn off excess energy.

“One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand, four...!” I collapsed. I rolled over onto my back—on the living room floor—and stared up at the ceiling trying to catch my breath.

After Dillon and I had sat in silence at Barnes & Noble for a while, he said he had to go off and meet some buddies for a bite to eat at what sounded like a trendy bistro on the Waterfront in Boston. I had told him my Saturday night plans were to coordinate a camping trip to Maine. *Loser*. But it was really just a night alone deciding which package to select from the L.L. Bean website.

Secretly, I had been hoping Dillon was going to ask me to join him and his friends. Not that I would have gone. I knew myself. I would have used the camping trip research—or some other lame excuse—to avoid going. But I still wanted him to ask.

I got up from the living room floor and grabbed my T-shirt. I was soaked and wiped the perspiration from my underarms. I hadn’t turned on the air

conditioner. The heat was good for sweating out any toxins. I threw the shirt in the hamper. “I need a shower.”

Funny thing about living alone, you talk to yourself more.

As a kid, I considered myself more outgoing. Then my mother died of breast cancer when I was twelve. My dad was not much of a talker to begin with, but after her death he fell into a depression. He'd leave early in the morning to work the assembly line at the Ford plant, come home late, eat, and then go to bed. Those were pretty much my teenage years.

I turned on the shower and stepped out of my boxer briefs. As the room filled with steam, I went over to the mirror and looked at myself.

“Dillon Deiss, would you ever want a boyfriend like me?” I covered my birthmark, as best I could, using two hands. “I'm not bad looking. Am I?” The wine-stain mark spanned part of my chest and traversed underneath my left side.

“You should be lucky it's not on your face,” my mother used to say. “Some kids can't hide theirs under a shirt.”

I went over to the toilet, peed, flushed, and stepped inside the shower. The hot water felt good on my sore muscles. “Not a bad workout,” I said and rubbed my abs.

The Pretenders' “Middle of the Road” came to mind. I had played it in the car on the way home. The Pretenders were my favorite band. I began to sing while I lathered up with a bar of the oatmeal soap I picked up at Whole Foods. When I started washing my groin, Dillon came to mind and soon my erection returned.

“Again,” I said and looked down at it. “Well, it has been a while. Maybe if you... you know... you'll stop popping wood at the thought of a bulge in a pair of khaki shorts.”

I had one hand against the cold tile and the other... well, down there. It felt so good; I couldn't stop. I tried to—just a few little tugs and hold back—but I just couldn't. Not anymore.

The next thing I knew, I was in an all-out fervor. My knees began to quiver. The water sprayed against my erection and sent a shiver up my spine.

“OH GOD.”

I continued. Part of me wanted to stop, but it felt too good, and my hand just took over. It was a blur. "Stop, stop."

I felt the wave. I was too late. I screamed. My knees buckled, and I fell onto the shower's tiled floor.

I leaned forward and let the water pulse against my shoulder blades. My semen washed down the drain. "Jesus Christ." I sat back and let the spray hit my chest, trying to catch my breath. "Dillon."

Chapter Four

The next day, as the rain came down in sideways sheets, I planned out the rest of my camping trip to Little Point, Maine—for a kayak and camping adventure given by L.L. Bean.

“Yeah, next weekend,” I said, into the phone, to Ron. He and I had come to know each other from previous L.L. Bean trips.

He told me he had booked the same weekend, and started on about his investment firm. Both of us being in finance was something else we had in common. I think one of the reasons I connected with him was because I felt I could talk shop without needing to get too personal. Yet he had this way of pulling things out of me.

I looked out from my screened porch while he went on about a recent stock run for Ogle Inc. The lake was barely visible through the rain. “Yeah, I still got about half the shares I bought back in 2002. They’ve seen a good run lately.”

“Good?” he said. “Hundred fifty percent is more than good.”

Years ago, before college even, I received a small inheritance from my grandmother, and I invested it in the market.

In a moment of weakness, I had shared this with Ron. He would sometimes bug me for information on solid growth stock and was forever trying to calculate my net worth. “You a millionaire yet?”

“Hardly,” I said and changed the subject. “So I’m going up Friday night after work.” I leaned up against my porch’s wooden column. I could smell the ozone in the air. “I should get to Little Point around eight.”

“I’ll stake out a spot for our tents,” he said. His voice sputtered from having me on speaker in his car. “I’m leaving work early and should be there by five.” Ron lived in New Hampshire and was closer to the site.

While our friendship had been platonic, last summer when we had camped together things got a little *heated*. We had had a few beers at Woody’s, the tavern near the campsite. It was our last night camping. A rainstorm came through, and Ron’s tent sprung a leak. He wound up staying with me. I was in a spell of self-inflicted abstinence and was apparently pent-up. One thing led to another, and we wound up masturbating together, each of us in our own sleeping bag.

He got naked, pulling off his shirt and shorts, and waving his wand about for me to see. “So fucking horny,” he had said.

We popped off together in a series of masculine grunts and groans.

I, of course, had kept my shirt on and made a mess of it. Afterward, I had to change it discreetly in the dark. Gary has been the only one to see me completely naked.

While I’ve never really been one to mess around much, that one time in the tent, was just that.

Well, until the next morning...

Around five a.m., it got really cold outside, and he climbed inside my sleeping bag. The next thing I knew I was on top of him, fucking like I was in a remake of *Brokeback Mountain*.

Even though I enjoyed it—he had a solid body from years of rock climbing and felt good pinned underneath me—I wasn’t one to have sex without emotion, but for whatever reason my guard had been down.

Ron and I haven’t talked much about it. But I think he too felt it was a no-strings-attached biff. “God, I needed that,” he said when I rolled off him. “Thanks,” he added.

It was like I had let him borrow a power tool or something. I felt a little guilty. “You’re welcome.”

Even though, as of late, I’ve been as horny as a sex addict at a porn convention, I’m hoping this time his tent is waterproof. I think we work better as *just* camping buddies.

“The weather is supposed to be nice,” he said, to which I concurred. We said our goodbyes and hung up.

Since it was raining, and I didn’t have much to do indoors, I decided to go to the office. It would be quiet, and I’d be able to catch up on some reports.

The wipers on my Explorer were on full speed when I pulled into the parking lot. “Glad I didn’t choose this weekend to go to Maine,” I said, as I pulled in next to an Accord, the only other car in the lot. I got out and ran to the door of the building.

Surprisingly, I didn't need my badge to get in. I wiped my feet on the rug in the lobby and headed for the Finance section.

"It's in the bag. Not a problem." I heard a voice say from the second floor's walkway that overlooked the lobby's courtyard. "The media's going to have a frenzy with this thing."

I heard the elevator door open and tried to catch a glimpse of the speaker, but the voice trailed off. "Who the hell was that?" I shrugged my shoulders and went through my department.

When I got to my desk, I flipped on my computer and started to settle in. A clap of thunder roared overhead. "Definitely glad I didn't go camping this weekend. Next weekend will be so much—"

My computer wouldn't log me in.

"Hmm." I tried my password again. "Account does not exist. Huh?" I typed over my username to make sure I had had it right, entered my password again and hit enter. "What the...?"

I picked up the phone to dial the help desk but there was no dial tone. I huffed. "Great. Must be the weather." I spun my chair around, opened my file cabinet drawer, and took out a hard copy of my report. "Back to ancient times," I said and sat reviewing it with my mechanical pencil and a calculator.

After an hour, I stood up and stretched. My abs were killing me from the prior day's workout. I bent backwards and winced in pain. The lights went out. "Oh, come on!" It was late afternoon, so it wasn't really dark inside, but with the storm going on outside I at least needed my overhead light in order to go over the EBITDA report. "All right, this is just a waste of—"

A loud bang came from what sounded like the other side of the wall in front and to the right of me—which was where the IT department kept their servers. I started to walk toward the sound, but out of the corner of my eye I saw a small fleet of black SUVs pull into the parking lot.

I walked over to the window. "What the hell is going on?" They pulled up front and parked in the handicap spots and got out. "The FBI?"

"I'm telling you, I don't know what happened," I said to the man who had showed me his badge and made sure the lights went back on.

“And you’re the head accountant?” he asked.

“Well, I’m not the *head* accountant, but I am an accountant.” My stomach felt queasy. I was nervous, even though I knew I hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Okay, Mr. McCormick. Just stay there.” I was sitting at a table by the Danvers printer.

The door to the department opened. Mr. Whitfield walked in and, behind him, Bill—the Vice President of Finance. My boss.

I stood up.

My boss looked at me. “Evan. What are you doing here?”

“Uh, I just came in to run the EBITDA report.”

He shook his head.

I picked at my fingernail. “What’s going—”

The FBI officer, a tall man with a five o’clock shadow, was suddenly by my side. “Let’s keep it down, Mr. McCormick.”

A couple of other officers came over. They huddled in discussion and then brought Whitfield, my boss, and me into a conference room—the one by the door, we used to prepare for board meetings. They left us alone, with a guard at the door, and went back to moving file cabinets about and unplugging more computers.

Mr. Whitfield’s face was white. My boss avoided eye contact.

I stood up and started pacing. I looked out the window and into the department. “Does this have anything to do with—?”

“Shh,” said Bill. “The place is probably bugged.”

Mr. Whitfield cleared his throat. “Bill, you’re going to be the death of me.”

Chapter Five

“Evan, this place is beautiful. I feel like I stepped into Pottery Barn,” said Madeline when she walked into my house. “I didn’t know you had such flair.”

I scratched the back of my neck.

Dillon looked around. “Wow, it is nice.”

“Well, it *is* Pottery Barn furniture,” I admitted. “But I got it at an estate sale—nearly furnished the whole house for the price of what that leather couch,” I pointed to the living room, “would go for at retail.”

Dillon shook his head. “Leave it to the finance guy to bargain hunt.”

Being that my house was the closest to the office, I had invited a small group of us over. It was unlike me to do so, but these were unlikely times.

While the rainstorm had passed Monday morning, I knew Thoroughbred would be closed, but it felt weird to not at least show up at my usual time.

Sure enough, the doors had chains around the handles. There were a couple of news crews, and the television was abuzz with talks about the Ponzi scheme along the North Shore. Whitfield and my boss were arrested. I was mentioned as an “unnamed party that was released and had just happened to come in on a Sunday to catch up on work.”

Dillon sat down on my leather couch. “It must have been nice living so close to the office.” And it had been. Many days I would walk, bike, or jog to work.

Peter, Dillon’s buddy from Corridor Marketing, came to the door with a coffee-box from Dunkin’ Donuts and behind him was Barry from Sales, carrying bagels. “Nice digs,” Peter said, and put the coffee on my granite island.

I felt a little strange having so many people at my house. In the five years I had lived there, it had never seen so many visitors. I went to the kitchen, while my colleagues admired my little two-bedroom, two-bath home.

As I rummaged through the cabinets for some plates and napkins, I felt the need to apologize for my house’s rich appearance. “I bought it at the right time. It was a foreclosure. The previous owner had put in the granite. It just needed some finishing touches.”

Dillon and Madeline were in the guest bath admiring the décor. Peter opened the coffee and took the first pour, while Barry opened the bagels.

I put down some plates on the island.

Barry pulled apart a sesame bagel. "I would have put this on my expense account but that's been ceased."

"Oh, I don't mind chipping in," I said.

Barry took a bite of his bagel and put up a hand. "No, no." He spoke with his mouth full.

Madeline walked up with Dillon behind her. "Well, you've certainly done well for yourself, Evan," she said and poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Thank you."

Barry licked cream cheese from his finger. "Who would have thought Whitfield and Cheevers were scamming people." He shook his head. The buttons of his blue shirt looked as if they were going to pop.

Madeline stepped closer to me as Dillon grabbed a cup and started to pour. "These guys are bigwigs. You'd think they'd be smarter than to get involved in something like this."

"Well, we don't know the extent of their involvement," I reasoned. I didn't want to get into the Firkins Fiduciary Fund and took the cup of coffee Dillon poured and handed to me. "Thank you." I leaned against the countertop.

Madeline blew into her cup, glancing over at the wall by my refrigerator. "Oh, Evan. I just love that picture." She went over to it and looked back at me. "Is that from Pottery Barn too?"

Dillon moved closer to me. "The man's got taste." He elbowed me slightly. "Who would have known our head accountant had such fabulous interior design skills?"

I smiled nervously. "Senior, not head."

"Of course," Dillon said. He pulled me into a side hug. "Dude, you got nothing to worry about." He let me go. "They released you, free and clear."

I nodded and then said to Madeline, "I picked that up at an antique store in Essex a few years ago."

She touched the frame. "It's just divine."

I walked over to her. Dillon followed. “The dealer told me it was Conant at the turn of the century, before it became a vacationer’s hot spot.” I put a hand in my pocket and took a sip of my coffee, trying to be casual.

“Vacation hot spot?” Dillon asked. I hadn’t realized how close he was to me, and I flinched slightly when he spoke. “Sorry,” he said and touched the small of my back. I nearly melted.

Barry came forward. “Oh, sure. All these cottages were for the wealthy who lived in Boston and would come here during the summer.” Barry was the oldest of all of us. He was probably in his mid-to-late forties, and had been with Thoroughbred for fifteen years. I knew because Whitfield made a point of recognizing his service at our last all-employee meeting.

Peter stepped in. “What you all looking at?”

“Conant,” we said in unison and laughed.

Someone once told me all good parties happen in the kitchen. I had never had a party, but under the circumstances the gathering seemed to be successful.

We chatted for nearly an hour, until we went into my living area to switch on the television—which I hardly ever used—to see if any updates had come in on the scandal.

It turned out Thoroughbred wasn’t the only firm involved. There were a few other small and midsize businesses impacted, “From Beverly, Massachusetts, to Southern New Hampshire,” said one of the newscasters.

By lunchtime, my little impromptu get-together started to disperse. Dillon was the last to leave.

After walking Madeline to the door, I busied myself with crushing the cardboard from Dunkin’ Donuts, to prepare it for recycling, and cleaning the kitchen counter.

Dillon went back to the couch to get the coffee cup he had left on the coaster.

“You don’t have to leave,” I said.

With the cup in hand he stopped and looked back at me. “No?”

I suddenly lost my confidence. “I mean if you have to... you have to... I just meant...” I swallowed and dropped the dishrag. “I wasn’t pushing you out.”

He smiled and lifted his cup to me, as if in a toast. "Well, my coffee is still warm."

I walked around the island, technically into the dining area, and leaned up against the countertop.

He sat back down on my couch. Its burnt sienna leather seemed to accentuate the golden brown in his hair. "It was awfully nice of you to offer up your home," he said. He put his arm on the couch's back and crossed his leg, ankle at the knee.

"Oh, it was nothing." I waved a hand dismissively.

He started bouncing his leg. "So, what are you going to do?"

I crossed my arms at my chest. "About Thoroughbred?" I sighed. "Don't know."

He looked at the TV, which was turned off. "It was a surprise to us all. But like Peter said, we'll get unemployment... you just don't want to be on that too long."

I too trained my eyes on the blank TV. "I've got a little bit saved, enough to get by for a while..." I shrugged.

He got up and pulled at the inseam of his dress pants and came over to the dining room table. "You ever think of going into business yourself?"

I uncrossed my arms and pushed away from the countertop. "Me? What do I know about running a business?" I grabbed the cardboard I had folded for recycling.

"You know more about the finances than any of us."

I turned. "What are you getting at?"

He put a hand on one of the dining chairs. "Peter and I came to Thoroughbred... with an ulterior motive."

I raised an eyebrow and set the cardboard down again.

He leaned into the chair, his butt sticking out. "We had only planned on staying a year before going out on our own. Maybe this just moves up the plan." He looked at the floor. "We could use a good finance guy."

I bit my lower lip. "Really?"

He stood up and came closer to me. I backed up and put my hands on the counter behind me.

We stared at each other for a beat. I couldn't look away.

He smiled. "It's just something to consider."

My heart beat faster. "I'll consider you. Ah, it!" I felt my face flush. "I'll consider it." I wanted to jump him. He looked so hot with a few shirt buttons undone and those dress slacks, which hugged all the right places.

He chuckled. "Give me some thought."

A strange hot and cold sensation boiled up inside me. It took all I had to pull back from kissing him. I broke my gaze and looked out at the lake through the screened porch. "You want to go for a walk?" I turned to find he had moved closer to me.

"Sure," he said. I could smell the coffee on his breath, but I didn't care. "Oh, sorry," he said and stepped back. "It's just..." He looked down and shook his head. "Never mind."

Halfway around the lake, Dillon took off his dress shirt and continued the rest of the way in a tank top. I tried not to look but found it almost impossible. The ribbed cotton shirt embraced what seemed to be a ripped-looking torso. His upper arms had nice definition, but not too much. I licked my lips. Miraculously, I was able to keep my arousal from sprouting.

"What do you like about camping?" Dillon asked me.

I clipped a dead branch from a mulberry bush. "Well, I like being outdoors." I threw the twig into the woods. "I grew up in the city... Detroit. My grandmother owned a cottage on Lake Michigan."

Dillon stepped behind me. We had been walking side by side, but along the eastern side of the lake the path narrowed. "Your mother died when you were a teen and your grandmother when you were how old?" he asked, inferring from an earlier conversation.

"Eighteen."

He didn't say anything at first. I just heard his footsteps behind me. "My mom was a single parent. My dad left us when I was a baby and later died."

I stopped and turned around. He had his dress shirt wrapped around his waist. "I'm sorry," I said.

“Don’t be.” Dillon grinned, then pulled off his tank top and started to undo his pants.

My look must’ve been one of wonder, for he stopped when he started to unzip. “Just thought I’d go for a swim.” He wiped his underarms with his tank, and we walked to the end of a little dock, nestled in a crop of tall grass. “Aren’t you hot?”

I swallowed. I didn’t want to take off my shirt. “I’m okay.” I looked into his soft brown eyes and down to the ground. He was kicking off his shoes. “I’ve got an extra bathing suit, you can use, back at the house.”

He was back to undoing his pants. “I’m fine.” He kicked them off revealing a light blue pair of boxers. He folded his clothes and placed them on the edge of the dock. He snapped his underwear’s waistband and said, “These will do.”

His body was amazing—a nice, soft patch of hair on his chest that travelled down the middle of his abs. His stomach was solid. I could see the outline of his abs. A soft patch of brown went down into his blue boxers. I began to get stiff in my pants. *Evan, you’ve been so good. Control yourself.* I put my hand in my pocket and adjusted.

Dillon walked out onto the small wooden pier. Even his feet looked strong and sexy. He was careful to step over the missing slats in the middle. “You should come in,” he said, looking back at me.

“Maybe later.” I walked out after him. I had never seen anyone use this dock. From here I could see my cottage on the opposite side.

“Later?” He knelt down and felt the water. “Oh, man, that’s cold.”

I sat down and took off my shoes.

He looked back at me. “Toe dipper?”

I smirked. “Someone’s got to stay back and watch for the lake monster. We wouldn’t want it to eat you up.”

He rubbed his chest. “Stop.” He looked out at the water and back at me. “There ain’t no lake monster.”

I put my foot in the water. It was cold. “Legend has it,” I chided.

“Well, I’ve never been one to let something stand in the way of what I want.” He balanced himself while he stood and dipped a foot into the water. “Jesus! You wouldn’t think it’s ninety degrees out. How does this water stay so cold?”

“Must be the monster. He churns out ice.”

He shrugged and then dove in.

I chuckled and watched the water ripple where he went under. Suddenly, he popped up.

“Woo! Talk about refreshing.”

I took off my dress shirt. I had a T-shirt underneath.

“C’mon in, chickenshit.”

I stood up and moved to the edge he had dove off. My wet feet left footprints on the wood. “No. You enjoy. Remember, the monster. Someone’s got to look after you.”

He started to swim toward me. He had a devilish grin on his face.

I stepped back.

He stopped swimming. “Hey, watch out for those missing slats.”

I turned just as I was about to step through a hole. “Oh, wow. Thanks.”

He put his hands on the pier and pulled himself up. The water slid off his body. I could see the outline of his penis in his underwear, and maybe he saw me looking at it, for he pulled away the cotton from clinging to him as he sat and chuckled. “Damn water’ll make it shrivel up. I’m not that small, normally.”

I laughed nervously and put my hand in my pocket to stop anything from sprouting.

He leaned back on his elbows, closed his eyes, and pointed his face to the sun. “Oh, that feels nice. I love the warm sun on my body.”

I sat down next to him. My attempt at thwarting a rise was failing. “You’ve got a nice body.” *Evan Capri McCormick! Control your—*

He turned to me, eyes wide and mouth agape. A grin came over his face. “The lake monster did it to me.”

I furrowed my brow.

“The lake monster made my body... Oh, I don’t know.” He blushed and looked the other way.

Smitten, I edged closer to him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you nervous.”

“That’s not it.” He turned, and his head jerked back ever so slightly, seemingly surprised that I was closer still.

I felt stupid for being so forward and leaned back.

He sat up. “You know, Evan.” He kicked at the water. “I really think you’re... You say *I* have a nice body.” He was looking toward my house. “You look pretty rock hard yourself.”

I cleared my throat and adjusted my crotch.

He chuckled. “Not like that. Oh, God, Dillon, you couldn’t speak if they taught you how.” He looked at me. “What I meant was, I can tell you work out. You’ve got good tone, from what I can see.” His foot splashed in the water. He leaned forward, put his hand in and washed off some dirt on his knee. “But you’re always covered up in dress shirts and whatnot, so it’s hard to see.”

My cuticle was stinging from picking it so much. I was still wearing my dress slacks, meant for the office, yet rolled up to the knee.

He touched my calf with his foot. “Look at those calves.” He started to kick playfully at my leg. “Damn, those muscles will break my toe if I kick any harder.”

I laughed. I loved the attention. I hadn’t had this in so long. But then something happened. It wasn’t about sexual attraction. In fact, I probably still had an erection, but it didn’t matter. I didn’t notice. It was as if a switch had flipped on, a warm flow filled me and a soft buzz took over. Something tugged at me inside. I kicked back at his calves. “Ouch,” I said. “Damn, you’re just as hard.”

We held each other’s gaze for a moment and then burst into laughter at the same time.

“I think you need to get wet,” he said. “You’re looking pretty hot.”

I could feel my face turning red and looked away. A clump of lake grass swayed in the ripples our feet were making. Suddenly, I felt a couple of droplets on my neck. I turned.

Dillon had his wet hand above me. He reached down and got some more.

“Hey, hey!”

“Oh, yeah? Too much for you?” He reached and got more water and splashed me.

I felt my dimples nearly crack. The grin on my face must've been so big. "Dillon!"

Then, he soaked me.

I got up on my knees, reached down into the water, and splashed him back. "Ah, it is cold!" I yelled.

He was laughing. He jumped off the pier and, in midair, pulled himself into a cannonball. He landed in front of me and I got completely drenched.

"You son of a..." The grin hadn't left my face, and I found myself taking my pants off, kicking them to the side and stripping off my... I stopped. Another splash of water came my way and I pulled off my shirt, threw it behind me and jumped in.

On the walk back, I covered up in my dry dress shirt. Dillon just strutted bare-chested. We were both in our wet underwear. The woods were so thick and overgrown, I doubted my neighbors could see. Besides, I didn't care.

"Damn, that felt good," Dillon said.

I was barefoot and stepped gingerly to avoid the rocks. "The water was refreshing, after all."

The path was wider on this side. He walked beside me and clasped his pants under one arm while he adjusted his shoes in his other hand. "That's not what I meant."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

He snickered and looked back at the lake. "Never mind."

We walked further. My boathouse was approaching on our right and my house just to the left of it, around the bend.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing his shoes at the two-story structure.

"That's my boathouse. I use it for storage."

He looked at me. "No boat?"

I pointed with my chin up to the hill in front, next to my parked Explorer. "My kayak. I stand it up in there in the winter."

"Ah. I see."

“I don’t really use it much.” I turned in the direction of Mrs. Johnson’s place behind us. “Some of my neighbors have converted theirs into little studios. Mrs. Johnson, up the road, has a watercolor studio in hers. And my neighbors on the other side,” I said, pointing my thumb behind me, “actually rent theirs out as a studio apartment.”

He started around the front and climbed up the small dirt step, steadying himself with shoes and pants out to his sides for balance. “This is pretty cute.” He looked up at the second story. “And tall.”

I stepped up behind him, noticing his little butt jiggle in the dampness of his shorts. “I like it.”

“It’s nice. You could convert this into a great little place and probably get a nice rent check.”

I nodded. “I could. It’s just the initial investment. There’s no electricity, and I’d have to put in plumbing.”

“Hmm.” He opened the door and went inside.

I went in after him. It was pretty empty, save my mountain bike, some yard tools, and a box of Christmas ornaments.

He put his shoes and clothes down on the ledge by the window.

I brushed away a cobweb from the rafter.

Dillon started to climb the ladder that went to the second floor loft.

“Careful. You’re barefoot... splinters.”

“Meh.”

I got a peek up his shorts but quickly looked away. I felt a little perverted having peeked.

He hoisted himself up and sat with his legs dangling over the side. “Hot up here.”

I looked out the window. “Heat does rise.”

“Nice view,” he said.

I looked up at him.

He switched from staring at me to looking out the window. “That too.”

I chuckled and went over to where he had placed his clothes, to put mine down as well, and was about to climb up with him, but he had started back down.

“It is hot up there.” He was looking over his shoulder while he descended. “Mr. McCormick says I should look out for splinters.”

“He does, does he?”

He jumped off the third rung. “Well.” He put out his hands and then clapped his thighs, which made a wet slapping sound.

“You want to get out of those wet clothes?” I asked. I cleared my throat. “I mean...”

He laughed. “Sure.”

I went to the door. “I’ve got some you can borrow. You’re probably my size. Medium? Thirty or thirty-two inch waist, if I were to—” I turned around.

His back was to me. He was pulling up his tan dress pants over his naked butt. His wet boxers were on the floor. He turned around and put his arms out by his sides. “Ta da.”

I could see the weight of his penis flap in the looseness of his pants. I licked my dry, lower lip and bit it.

“No bother. I don’t mind freeballing it once in a while.”

I felt myself get hard, almost instantly. Dressed only in boxers, with an airy fly opening, it wasn’t easy to conceal. I turned around. “I should get dressed.”

Chapter Six

“Holy shit,” I said. There was a little spit that had come out of my mouth where I had been biting the pillow. “What the fuck? Is someone slipping me Viagra or something?” I rolled onto my back and edged away from the stain I had made on my sheets. I sat up to catch my breath and leaned against the headboard.

I had wanted to call Dillon—it had been two days since our swim in the lake—but I was so wound up, I didn’t think I could have an intelligent conversation without wanting to leap through the phone and jump him.

“Okay,” I exhaled. “Now you can call and be a little more levelheaded.” I took my cell phone off the nightstand and pressed his name to call him. It rang four times. I was expecting it to go to voice mail just as he answered.

“I was hoping that was you.”

I smiled. “Your wish just came...” I looked down at my sheets. “Came true.” I put my face in my hand and shook my head.

“You still going to Maine? Camping?” We had talked about my upcoming trip before he left.

“Why? You wanna come?” I asked. I put my hand down on the mattress, accidentally sliding it into my mess. “Oh, God.”

“What’s wrong?”

I pinched the phone between my cheek and shoulder, picked up my gym shorts—the ones I had desperately shucked when I had entered my bedroom—and wiped my hands. “Oh, nothing. I just... never mind.”

“Well, I’d love to come.”

I threw the shorts onto the floor and stood up. “You would? Really?”

“You can teach me how to kayak.”

“I could.” I looked at myself naked in the mirror.

“Cool.”

I brushed at the birth mark. “A buddy of mine is going to meet me there.”

“Oh.”

I suddenly got the impression that maybe Dillon wanted it to be just him and me. "He was going to leave work early but now that we don't have to work, I could get there before him." *And get him a separate lot.* I didn't want to be rude and blow off Ron, but I really wanted time alone with Dillon.

"That's cool. I'd like to meet your friends."

I smiled. *That's sweet. He doesn't need to know Ron and I fooled around once... well twice.* "I don't have a ton of friends," I said and turned away from the mirror.

"Neither do I. Me; I'd rather have one or two deep, meaningful relationships than three-hundred fifty-six Facebook connections."

I sat down on the edge of the bed. "Three-hundred fifty-six?" I put my T-shirt back on, being careful not to take the phone away from my ear too long to miss a word of his.

He laughed. "Actually that *is* about how many connections I have on Facebook—at least, last time I looked."

"Wow." I put my feet on the bed rails. "I'm certainly not that popular."

"You sure you still want me to go to Maine with you? My entourage of Facebook friends might follow us," he joked.

I lay down on the bed and put my hands up inside my T-shirt. There was a gob of my goo glued to the hair on my stomach. I pulled at it. "I'd love it if you came." The doorbell rang. I shot up.

"Someone at your door?"

"Yeah."

"Call me later."

We hung up. I grabbed my gym shorts and jumped into them.

"Evan?" said a female voice.

I went out into the living room, through to the foyer and opened the front door. Wearing a sun hat and a large grin on her face, Mrs. Johnson stood on my front porch with her black Lab, Detritus, by her side. "Oh, hi."

"Hello, Evan," she said through the screen door. "Detritus and I were walking about, and I remembered I hadn't yet invited you to my art show next weekend."

I opened the screen door. "Hey, buddy," I said to Detritus as he plunged his way in. When Mrs. Johnson had had surgery I walked him for her.

As per usual, Detritus immediately went for my crotch.

I pushed him away. "Art show, huh?" Detritus was persistent and nudged me in the balls. I balked.

"Detritus!" Mrs. Johnson furrowed her brow and looked down at him. "Yes, I'm having a little show..." she said without taking her eyes from her dog. "What in God's name are you—"

I suddenly felt the slobber of Detritus' warm tongue wetting my shorts. "Oh, goodness." I pushed him away.

"Did you spill something on your shorts? He's found something he likes." She chuckled.

My shorts! I looked down and wiped the dog spit and other fluids from my thigh. "Oh, Jesus. I... I... I spilled some milk when I was eating cereal." My face must have been fifty shades of red.

"That explains it. Detritus loves dairy." She handed me a colorful postcard-invitation with a photograph of one of her paintings. "It'll be not this Saturday afternoon, but the next. I'll have some wine and cheese, nothing fancy. Just a few friends in the backyard to check out some of my latest creations." She pulled Detritus by the collar. He was still going for me. "I just put the finishing touches on a really beautiful one of our lake." She clasped her hands together and smiled. "You're going to like it."

All of Mrs. Johnson's paintings were of the lake. "Oh, this will be great," I said, reading the dates on back of the card.

"It's a week from Saturday."

I looked up. Detritus was by her side and away from my crotch. "I'll be there. Can I bring a friend?"

A smile pulled at her lips. "Evan," she said with a rise in her voice. "I'd be honored to meet... him?"

I could practically feel my eyes snap open. *I had never told her I was gay. Why did she assume?* "My friend, Dillon. He likes art." *He does? And how do you know he'll even go?*

"Oh." She put a hand to her chest. Her smile never left her face. Detritus started forward, but I held him back. "Splendid! I'd love to meet him."

She repeated the date and time, and left. I shut the door, locked it, and walked away shaking my head. I looked down at my pants. “Unbelievable.”

Chapter Seven

Dillon asked me to dinner at a place called 62 of Salem. We still hadn't discussed being gay. But it didn't matter. Being asked out to dinner, I felt it was understood. Besides, not bringing our sexuality into play made it more about us and less about sex, though the bonobo in me was threatening to make an appearance.

That afternoon, I splurged and went to an expensive men's clothing store at the mall. I dropped a hundred bucks on an indigo Henley, twill pants—which, to me, looked like offspring from a pair of jeans and khakis—and canvas shoes. I told the clerk I needed something trendy and let him pick it out. He put the medium-sized shirt I went for back on the rack and took out a small. "You're ripped. Show it off." He told me bicep cleavage was the rage, squeezed my upper arm and nodded as if confirming his decision. "And the shoes..." he said, I should wear without socks.

I did as I was told.

"You look very handsome," Dillon said. He took his napkin from the table. "Has anyone ever told you that you have great facial features? A nice, angled jawline." He drew his finger alongside his chin.

I think I blushed a shade darker than my wine stain. I, too, placed my napkin on my lap.

We sat at a two-top by the window. There was a view of the brick sidewalk and an occult shop—common in the city, as it's known for its acceptance of witches—across the way. The restaurant's décor—contemporary with bold colors, bottles of wine displayed A nice, angled jawline settings—matched its choice in food.

Dillon looked at the wine list. "I heard about this restaurant from a client. They supposedly have phenomenal food, a real eclectic mix."

I looked at the menu. "Great variety."

"I'm glad you wanted to have dinner with me."

I looked up. He was staring at me, and I smiled. "I'm glad you asked me."

We shared an appetizer of chickpea fritters, and he ordered us a bottle of pinot noir. We sipped, ate, and talked. After what was probably an hour or more, we finally ordered our entrees.

The waitress refilled our water goblets, and Dillon drank his. “Oh, I meant to tell you. I saw another Yankee billboard today.”

I put down my glass of water. “Oh?”

He looked out the window. “The guy on it kind of reminded me of you.”

I thrust my head back. “Me? Not the ‘Don’t let your meat loaf.’ one?”

His eyes widened. “You’ve... no. That’s another one.”

“God, how many are there?”

He sat back, picked up the linen napkin from his lap and wiped his mouth. “You should model. You got the looks.”

I touched my chest. “Ah, no.”

The waitress dropped off our arugula salads, and we ate them while bandying about nothing specific. It didn’t matter so much what we were talking about. It was the feeling I had for him that seemed to grow. That warm sensation I had felt deep inside, when we were sitting on the dock, felt like it was beginning to boil over. As the night went on, the more it seemed to percolate.

My scallops and his duck arrived as I sipped the last of my wine. Dillon asked if I wanted more. “Water’s fine,” I said.

We topped off our meal by sharing a fresh berry Pavlova.

“This was splendid, Dillon.” I put my napkin on the table. “Thank you.”

Dillon signed the credit receipt. “You don’t have to thank me.” He put his gold card back in his wallet.

I sat there with my chin resting on the top of my hands.

He sat back and slowly rubbed his stomach. “I’m full.” He was wearing a slim-fitting, vibrantly blue dress shirt—one he told me earlier he had picked up at some French boutique in Boston. His hands made a slight rubbing noise against the material. “I don’t think I could eat for a week.” I tried not to look down further to the form-fitting, gray jeans he had on.

We got up.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” the waitress said, as we walked toward the front door.

“My pleasure,” Dillon replied, touching my back as he held the door open for me.

We strolled about Salem's Pickering Wharf for a while, watching the boats rise and fall in the wake of the harbor's current. After that, we meandered over to the Common, where Dillon had parked his Passat and drove a few miles to Route 128, listening to The Pretenders. He knew I liked them and played a shuffle for me on his iPod.

“There,” he said, pointing out my window, toward the advertisement. “That one.”

I looked at the billboard and read the slogan, “We're bigger than you think.”

“The one on the end. The good-looking one with the sandy brown hair.”

I caught another glimpse as we passed it. “He's practically naked, except for the gym shorts.” The photo had been of a diverse group of men standing beside one another, each scantily dressed and holding or eating Yankee beef products.

“What's particularly effective about these campaigns is that they take a humdrum product, sexualize it and strike a chord with the shopper in the household.” Dillon shifted the car into a lower gear. His silver and black bracelet slid down his wrist. “They speak to straight homes—with two point four children—as well as gay homes, or even people living alone. They've got everyone in the industry talking about them.”

“Corridor still has the campaign?”

He looked over his shoulder and got into the passing lane. “Does it matter?”

I shrugged. “Madeline told me they've absorbed quite a few of Thoroughbred's accounts with the fallout.”

He passed a BMW and cut in front of it. He put on his directional to get off at my exit.

We pulled off the highway and started onto the back-roads into Conant. It suddenly got dark and quiet. There were not a lot of streetlamps in Conant.

“So what makes a Detroit city boy pick the sleepy little town of Conant, Massachusetts to settle down in?” He shifted into third.

“Oh, I don't know. I guess I like the country feel. After living in the inner city as a kid, I sort of wanted the opposite of it all.” *Back on the Chain Gang*

came on the radio. "Conant has that rural feel, yet isn't too far from civilization."

Dillon turned up the radio. "I like this one. It's an oldie."

"It came out the year I was born."

He looked at me. "Eighty...?"

"Eighty-three."

"That's right. I was eighty-four."

We continued onward. The houses got bigger and more expensive looking. Conant had seen a lot of development in the early 2000's and, despite the recession, had weathered it okay.

I rolled down my window as he turned onto my street. Mrs. Johnson's lights were out. We drove a little farther, and he pulled into my lot. His tires popped along the gravel as he parked behind my car. My kayak was upturned in front of it.

Dillon shut off his engine, and his emergency brake made a clicking noise as he pulled it up.

We sat in the dark for a moment.

He turned toward me. His knee pressed up against the stick shift. "I had... I had a good time tonight."

I had my hand on the door latch. "You're not coming in?"

He grinned. "I didn't want to be—"

"Presumptuous?" I answered.

He nodded and slowly leaned forward. I felt drawn and met him somewhere above the emergency brake. He licked his lips. "I probably smell like Moroccan-spice and—"

I kissed him. I couldn't hold back anymore.

"Wow," he said. Then he kissed me.

"It's not Bolognese," I said, without taking my mouth off his.

He slowly pulled back. "Fresh berry Pavlova?"

I shook my head. "Heaven." I kissed him again.

His hand went around my waist, as he continued to kiss me, and through it said, “And you...” He tenderly bit my lower lip and went back to kissing me. “You taste just like...” He pulled back just enough to utter it softly. I could feel his breath against my mouth. “Like magnificence.” The tip of his tongue touched mine. He moved away, and I looked into his eyes. “And a hint of wonder.”

I put my hand on his back and pulled him closer, kissing him deeply. My hand went up to the nape of his neck and caressed the soft buzz of his hairline. “Wonder, huh?”

He shivered, closed his eyes and his head fell back a bit. “I wonder what I’m getting into.”

I kissed his Adam’s apple and worked my way back up to his mouth, taking his upper lip gently between my teeth.

He moaned, and our tongues met. He nearly climbed over the center console to get to me.

I clawed at his shirt and reached up the back of it. It had pulled loose from his jeans. “Maybe we should head inside,” I said.

He leaned back, exhaled, and nodded. The crotch of his jeans was bulging.

When we got inside, we had calmed down enough to have an after-dinner drink. But our passion soon returned, and I brought him into my bed, where we made love.

Foreplay, sex, afterglow. I like them all, but to me—if the bookends aren’t strong, the sex doesn’t hold up.

We lay in bed. My head was propped against his upper arm, and he was tracing random patterns along my jawline. I shivered and arched my neck.

“You know, it’s been a while for me,” he said and started to rub my chest.

“Same for me.” I took his hand, and he clutched my thumb.

He leaned over and kissed the tip of my nose. “You’re so friggin’ adorable.”

“Because I haven’t had sex in four-hundred years?” I leaned back so I could see him better.

He chuckled and a dimple appeared. “No, not because you’ve been so hard up.”

I elbowed him jokingly. "I didn't say I was hard up."

He shrugged a shoulder. "There I go again, not saying the right things." He pulled the sheet up from my waist and covered our still clutched hands. "What I meant was, you're cute because... I don't know." He let his head drop back down onto the pillow and threw up his free hand. "You just are. I can't put my finger on it."

I leaned over and onto his chest, curling the sheets up over me, leaving his lean stomach exposed. I started tracing lines up and down his abs.

He ran his hands through my hair.

I got up and kissed my way down to his navel. "You know, there really haven't been a lot of men for me." I looked back at him. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not the most outgoing of sorts."

"That's one of the reasons I like you so much." He gave a tender tug at my bangs. "You don't even know how fucking hot you are. Quietly strong and... in bed, holy shit."

I rested my head on his stomach. The sheets below his waistline began to stir. "Can I ask you something?" I said.

"At this point you could ask me anything."

I brushed my hand along his growing erection under the sheets. "You never said anything about my birthmark."

He got up on his elbows, and I kneeled on my haunches covering my own erection with the sheets.

He looked down at my chest, then to my eyes. "What's there to say?"

I smiled and gazed out the window. "You're just..." I turned to him, pointing at my chest. "You don't find this a turnoff?"

He came closer and grabbed my hand. "Are you high?" He shook his head. "Of course not. In fact..." He raised his eyebrows and with a much lower voice said, "I think it's kind of sexy."

I guffawed and looked away. "C'mon."

He yanked at the sheets, and my penis flopped out from the confines. "No, really. It makes you..." He sighed. "I'm gonna screw this up again." Then he said much faster, "It makes you real. It makes you... flawed, but in a good way." He put his head down. "That didn't sound right."

I got up on my knees, went over to him, pushed him onto his back and straddled him. "It's perfect. You're perfect." And I bent down and kissed him.

He opened his eyes. "Oh, one more thing."

I sat up and grimaced. "Yeah?"

"Are you gay?" he asked with a smile.

I laughed.

"I'm just asking." He put his arms out. "We never really got that out in the open. You just attacked me in the car and then fucked me so hard I went cross-eyed."

I laughed even louder. "They did cross a little, you know."

He sat up and pushed me gently on the shoulder. "They did not."

I didn't say anything.

"Did they?"

I crossed my eyes and started a fake moan.

He pushed me down onto the bed and hovered over me. "Evan Capri McCormick. I'm going to give you an orgasm that'll make you scream." He looked over his left shoulder. "Oh, wait a minute. I already did that, didn't I?" He started these high-pitched screams, as if imitating me. He looked back at me, and we both burst into laughter.

Chapter Eight

“The wonder of it all,” I sang. I was zipping about the house with my vacuum. I like to clean prior to going away, so that when I come back I don’t walk into a mess. “Love and Dillon... me and Dillon, yeah,” I continued singing, off key, making up lyrics to the hum of my Dyson. “Isn’t love grand, yeah.”

I shut the vacuum off and wheeled it back into the laundry room, off the foyer. While in there, I took out the load from the dryer, brought it back into the bedroom, and had just begun to fold when my cell phone rang.

I looked at the screen. “Ron.” I picked it up. “Hey. What’s up?” I sat down on the edge of the bed. “I was just going to—”

He went on about having pulled his back while working out at the gym.

“I told you bodyweight exercises are the way to go. No equipment and you get a better—”

He interrupted and said he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to make it.

“Oh?” I smiled slightly, then shook my head to wipe it from my face. “I was going to head up early and stake out a spot for us.”

He said that he might try to come up Saturday night or Sunday morning for the kayak trip, if he was feeling better.

I pulled a pair of Dillon’s underwear from the laundry pile and smiled. “Oh, no problem. I’ll be bringing a... buddy of mine.”

He muttered something, with an air of surprise.

“Yeah. A lot’s happened since we last talked. Work...” He interrupted and said something about the scandal. “Yeah, I figured you’d have heard... I know, it’s been all over the—”

He asked me if I had heard the latest about Whitfield.

I bolted up. “What?”

I hung up with Ron, ran to the TV and flipped it on.

“We continue to bring you this developing news,” the blonde newscaster said—she was a pretty thing who looked older than me but was probably fresh out of college. “Thoroughbred Marketing of Beverly, Massachusetts, was dealt

another slap today. CEO and founder, Jonathan Whitfield, seventy-eight, is said to have died in his Marblehead home. No further information is available at this time.” Mr. Whitfield’s headshot from the company’s website, of him dressed in a gray suit and a red tie, flashed above the newscaster’s left shoulder.

My cell phone rang again. It was Dillon.

“Did you hear?” I asked upon picking it up.

“Holy shit. What happened?”

I shut the TV off. They had moved onto the weather. “I don’t know. The last I saw of him was Sunday.”

“You think he was murdered?”

I sat on the edge of my Pottery Barn chair. “I... I would hope not. He was old. Maybe just the stress of it all?”

“What a time to go!”

I leaned back in the chair and exhaled. “I feel bad.” I gave a slow, disbelieving shake of the head. “I don’t think he knew about it.”

“The scandal?”

“He was too old, nearly ready to retire. I think he had the wool pulled over his eyes.” I almost forgot I was talking to Dillon for a second. “I should’ve warned him.”

“Huh?” I could hear fumbling in the background, like he was getting out of bed, or something. “Did you know about it, Evan?”

I got nervous flush and felt a bit tingly. “No!” I sat up. “Why would you think that?”

The silence on the other end seemed like it lasted forever. He huffed. “Anyway...” Then his voice got that smoky, low tone and he went on, “I was just thinking about you.”

I grinned, any nervousness I had about the scandal suddenly vanishing. “You were?” I bit my lower lip and asked, “And something popped up?”

The doorbell rang.

“Hold on,” I said to Dillon. “It’s probably Mrs. Johnson wanting me to walk her dog or something. I’ll call you later.”

We hung up, and I went to the door and opened it.

My mouth fell open. "What?"

There was a delivery man, holding a beautiful bouquet of yellow roses. "Mr. McCormick?"

"Yeah." I opened the screen door. He handed me the flowers, and I signed a delivery slip.

He nodded, "You have a great day," and headed back to his truck.

Dillon stood in my living room. He was dressed for hiking, in a pair of Levis, North Face hiking boots, a Kings of Leon concert T-shirt, and his Red Sox baseball cap. He had arrived right on time. "I didn't want to send them after we got back from camping," he said. "I couldn't wait. They'll still be fresh when we get back Sunday."

I looked over at the display I had put on the island between the dining area and the kitchen. I had never had anyone buy me flowers before, let alone have them delivered. "Dillon, I don't... I was so shocked." I looked back at him, reached out and kissed him. "Thank you. You're... you're the best."

He gave a dismissive wave. "Ah."

I looped my finger into the back of his pants and led him into the kitchen. "I have a little surprise for you, too." I held out a hand. "Nothing fancy."

"A surprise for me?"

I pulled out a seat for him to sit down at the café table. "It's not much, but..." I went to the counter and grabbed a bag of still-warm muffins and some coffee, which were away from his view, on the other side of the refrigerator. "I know you like blueberry muffins." I walked over and put them down on the table. "There's this little bakery up the street that makes them. They're to die for. They just came out of the oven."

He patted his stomach. "I thought I was watching my girlish figure."

I peeked over the table, in obvious exaggeration, and looked down at his crotch. "There ain't nothing girlish about you."

He chuckled, pulled the bag closer, opened it and sniffed. "Ah, heavenly." He put his nose in the bag and took another whiff. "Umm."

"Well, we could sit and smell them." I sat down. "Or eat them."

He looked up. "How about both? Why don't we take them in the car and eat along the way? I want to get up there."

I pushed my seat back and slapped my thighs. "Great idea."

I went over to the television to shut it off. "You heard, right?"

"Heart attack."

I turned. Dillon was right behind me. "Poor guy," I said.

"Poor?" he asked.

"You know what I mean."

We crossed the Piscataqua River Bridge into Maine around eleven. I was driving my Explorer. Dillon sat in the passenger seat, looking very sexy.

"You're too much of a distraction," I said.

He chuckled and grabbed the muffin bag. "Keep your eyes on the road."

"I don't think there's anything left."

He opened the bag and poured the remaining contents in his mouth. "There were a few more crumbs."

I pushed the glasses I wore for distance up on the bridge of my nose. "God, you eat like an ox. You want me to stop for lunch?"

"Nah. I'll be fine. I can wait." He pulled at the inseam of his jeans, scooting himself up in the process. "Though quite honestly, I can't wait to get you in that tent."

I glanced over. He was fidgeting with his crotch, which instantly got me hard. "Neither can I."

We drove a little longer, listening to more of Kings of Leon's "Mechanical Bull." I came upon a rest stop.

"Oh, thank God," Dillon said. "I really gotta go."

"Why didn't you tell me? I would've stopped earlier." I turned on my blinker and pulled off the exit.

Dillon unplugged his iPod, and The Pretenders' CD I had in started. I parked next to a Vanagon with a Human Rights Campaign sticker on its bumper. Two women got out.

Dillon opened the door. "You have to go?"

"No." I smiled and changed the track.

"What are you? A fucking camel?"

I snickered. "I'll wait here." And I did.

"Lover of Today" changed to "I'll Stand By You" and I hummed along. I was grateful for Dillon being in my life. "Thank you, God," I muttered.

The lesbians came back. Dillon was walking several feet behind them. The girls were chatting and laughing. The heavier one grabbed the tip of the blonde's fingers and helped her toward the car. Dillon smiled at me. The girls got in their van.

"What's the matter?" Dillon asked, with the passenger door open.

I turned my head and wiped a small tear from my eye. "Nothing. Why?"

He got in, grabbed my hand and we drove off.

Around one, we got to the campsite, which sat on a bluff overlooking the bay.

Dillon stretched his back, wandered over to the edge, and took in the view. "This is awesome."

I walked around the front of the car. "This is my favorite spot." I kicked at the ground where I usually put up the tent and then looked out at the ocean. "Great view, huh?"

He turned back. "I never knew camping could be so nice."

I kicked away a few pebbles. "If we waited another hour, all the good spots would be taken."

"Is that why you wouldn't let me pee again?" he said, walking over to a clump of bushes.

"Not there!"

He turned around with his zipper part way down.

"There's an outhouse down that path," I said, pointing.

He sighed, zipped back up and headed down the trail.

When he got back, he helped me finish setting up the tent. We had the entrance face the water, so we could sit inside and look out at the view.

He climbed inside. "I love the smell of a tent."

I scooted in behind him. "You and your smells."

"I love smells." He leaned into me and sniffed slowly. "Like you." He kissed my neck.

"Dillon." I pushed him away. "Not yet. There are kids around."

He leaned back on his hands. "All right, all right."

"So," I said, with a clap of my hands, "now that we're staked, why don't we get some lunch?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

"You are a ravenous fella." I leaned in and kissed him.

He kissed me back and sat up. "I thought we were waiting."

"We are," I husked into the side of his neck.

He moaned. "Okay." He returned the kiss. "If this is waiting..." he grazed his hand along my neck, as I leaned my head back, "...then waiting is awesome."

Chapter Nine

Woody's was a burger joint on the outskirts of Little Point, Maine. A lot of people from the campground went there, as it was within walking distance. I had been there a couple of times with the L.L. Bean group, but I usually just hung back at my site and cooked up something on my propane grill.

In the middle of Woody's sat a bar. A woman, probably in her mid-forties with a ruddy complexion and dyed blonde hair, poured draft beer from a tap. Guys with big bellies and bushy beards played darts in front of her. Behind her was a pool table with a small group of men and women surrounding it.

"Merle!" she shouted. "Here's your Bud." She slid a beer down the bar. A dart player with a Harley Davidson bandana put out a hand, caught it and winked at her.

Dillon and I brushed our feet on the foyer's mat. The pool table group looked up, stopped talking for a bit and then went back to their business. We stepped in further and took a small table near the head of the bar, between the dart players and pool table. "This good?" I asked Dillon.

He pulled out a chair. "Good as any," he said, sat down and pulled a menu out from between the condiments and napkin dispenser.

I sat, took out a menu and looked at it. The corner of the menu had a little burn mark on its plastic covering that went through to the paper underneath, which claimed the fame of having Sagadahoc county's best burgers. "The place looks worse than—"

"What'll it be, fellas?" said a deep voice. "Something from the bar?" he added, with a drop of the *r*, as did a good many New Englanders. He was a large man, balding, unshaven, and wore a stained apron around his rotund mid-section.

"I'll have a Bud Light, please."

He looked over at Dillon and pointed with his chin.

"Same," Dillon said and watched him leave.

I grabbed a napkin to dry a spot of wetness that I hoped was left from someone wiping the table down. "The service may not be the best either, but I promise the food is decent." I balled up the napkin and put it aside.

“No worries,” Dillon said, without looking up from his menu.

I wiped at a spot in front of him, and he smiled at me.

“This place is fine.” He touched my hand with the tip of his finger and made a couple of soft little scratches.

I leaned back and let out a small sigh of relief. I wanted him to have a good time.

A tall woman, in a red uniform and nylons, made her way out of the kitchen, skirted past the group by the pool table, and came toward us. She was carrying a tray of burgers, and a pencil stuck out from the jet-black bun on top of her head. She stopped at our table. “Did Billy get you some drinks?” she asked, with an infectious smile.

Dillon looked up from his menu. “Oh, yes.”

She winked at him and snapped her gum. “Great. I’ll be back in a bit. It’s crazy tonight.” She walked away.

“No rush,” I said, but I didn’t think she heard me.

“Hey, look.” Dillon held out his menu and pointed to the back of it. “They serve Yankee Neighborhood Beef.”

I flipped my menu over and saw their logo on the bottom of it, next to another burn mark. “Hmm.”

We perused the dinner options a little while longer. Billy brought us our beers and took our order for the waitress, as she was still “in the weeds,” as he put it.

We both ordered burgers and were halfway through our beers when one of the bearded dart players approached us.

“You the branded one?” he asked me and made a horizontal line across his chest.

I looked down at my shirt. I was wearing a nondescript blue T-shirt I bought at Target years ago. *Is my wine stain showing?* I pulled at the bottom of my shirt.

“I’m sorry?” Dillon said, sat up and stuck out his chest.

The man stepped closer. “You’re not the cut one?” He held his beer up and listed a bit. A tall, trim man came up behind him.

I looked at Dillon. He was red in the face. I shook my head at him, so as not to start anything.

The waitress with the pencil still in her bun stepped between them and our table. "Jerry, you bothering these handsome fellas?"

"No." He wobbled a bit. He pointed at me, "I just thought he was that Yankee Beef guy."

I jerked my head back.

Dillon laughed loudly, putting his hand on the table and pushing back in his chair.

The waitress took a hard look at me, then waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, no." She pointed at me. "This guy's much cuter." And she walked away.

I squinted. "Huh?"

"You'll have to excuse my pal here," said the trim man. He was wearing an untucked, long-sleeve red-checked shirt rolled up at the sleeves, a pair of jeans, and work boots. He held Jerry up by the shoulder. "He's had a little too much."

I looked at Dillon, then back at the guy and laughed nervously. "That's okay." I furrowed my brow.

Jerry headed back toward the dart board, using the bar stools for support along the way. His friend watched him and then turned back to us. He shook his head. "Man's been here all afternoon. Doesn't know when to say 'when'."

Dillon took a sip of his beer. I grabbed my mug.

Jerry's friend rubbed his chin. I could practically hear the scrape of his stubble. "If you're up for some darts," he said, and then scratched at his jaw. "I could use a partner or two." He snickered and put his hands on his hips. "Jerry's beer goggles have him seeing double. I can't win for losing." He shook his head and extended his hand. "Name's Pike."

Pike slapped me on the back—in his chummy way. It was a little harder than the last time. The beer must have been affecting his sense of touch.

We had beat Ireland's Trio, as our opposing dart team called themselves. They were huddled in the corner, drinking away their shame from being beaten by the "Pretty Boys," as they called us.

Dillon came over with another pitcher of Bud Light and sat down at the new table we had grabbed—this one a little closer to the dart board.

“You do kind of look like him,” Pike said. He took the pitcher and started to refill my glass.

“I told him that,” Dillon said. “It’s uncanny.”

I shook my head.

Dillon pushed his glass closer to Pike. “But he hasn’t seen the ad Jerry was talking about... with the brand marks on the model’s chest.” He watched Pike fill his mug.

Pike slowed his pour as the beer head in Dillon’s mug began to rise. “There’s a billboard over by the Sagadahoc Bridge,” he said. He got his own mug and started to pour. “You should check it out.”

I grabbed my beer.

Pike put the pitcher down and raised his mug. “Thanks for the win, boys. The Pretty Boys.”

We spent the next morning kayaking. Dillon took to it quite well.

We paddled our way around a cove of black rock, and then made our way to a little beach by the bridge. A small wake of waves from the other boats about the bay splashed the sandy shoreline. Hanson Bay was so far inland that it didn’t have crashing waves like the coastline.

I could hear the flop of Dillon’s paddle behind me. “I kind of like this kayaking thing.” A flop came from my other side. “See? We didn’t need to do a test run out on the lake. This is easy.”

“It is. The bay is calm. It’s a great place to learn.”

“In other words, I ain’t seen nothing yet?”

I nodded. “In other words.” I looked back at him and he stuck out his tongue. “You might need that later,” I said, turned back around and paddled. “You might want to keep it in your mouth for safekeeping.”

The boat rocked, and I felt a splash of water on my neck.

“You’re gonna tip us,” I said, shimmying my hips to exaggerate the rocking. He had admitted earlier to being a little afraid of capsizing.

“All right. The tongue’s back in my mouth.” He paddled. “But only ’til I get you back in that tent.”

As I thought back to our morning romp—Dillon pinned under my arms and groaning as he thrust himself deep inside me—my paddle scraped the bottom of the shore.

Dillon pulled us closer by sticking his paddle in the ground. “We’re here,” he said and started out.

My mind was still stuck on him grunting and groaning under my downward thrust.

He waded in the water and pulled at the head of the boat while I sat inside. His biceps flexed, and the little tribal tattoo he had stretched with the flex of his arm. He stood, holding the throw rope in his hand. The Star Wars vintage, red T-shirt that he told me he had picked up at Target—hugged his chest. *Oh boy. He’s doing it to me again.*

He wore his Red Sox cap backwards, the little logo sat just above a tuft of blond hair. “What?” He put his hands on his hips. His tan corduroy cutoffs stretched tight along the zipper’s seam. “You gonna sit in there all day?”

I looked over my shoulder. “I can’t get out.”

“Huh?”

I looked down at my crotch and then back up at him.

“Again?” He shook his head and laughed. “You’re worse than a teenager.”

“I can’t help it. I was thinking about this morning, and…” I shrugged and then in a lower, more gravelly voice said, “You just really get me going.”

He dropped the rope, put a hand in his pocket and turned around. “You’re gonna get me worked up again. Stop.”

“All right, all right.” I stuck my paddle in the sand for leverage and scooted out.

He turned around, adjusting his crotch. He looked at my waistline. “Evan!”

“I told you. I can’t…”

“My God. You’re apt to have a hawk come down and perch on that thing.”

Chapter Ten

We hiked for several hours along the Piscataqua trail and stopped at a rest spot before we went back to the kayak. The shade felt good, and the scent of pine was enchanting. I closed my eyes to take it in.

“Next!” Dillon said and shut the door behind the outhouse, which had a sticker from the servicing company, *Blow Family Portables*. Dillon tapped a finger to the sticker. “That’s a marketing faux pas if I ever saw one.”

“Did you get a good one?”

He grimaced.

“You know. The Blow family. I thought maybe you got one while you were in there.”

“Oh, yeah.” He moaned. “It felt really good too.”

“Hmm. I’m a little jealous of this outhouse.” I started toward it.

“Are you going in there? You mean the camel has to pee?”

I turned, smiling, and went in.

I hated the smell of portable toilets—not that anybody likes them. I pulled my T-shirt up over my nose and did what I needed to. I didn’t like going to the bathroom in the bushes, like Dillon was ready to do again ’til I stopped him. The environmentalists said that it could damage some of the endangered flora. I finished up and was using the hand sanitizer when I heard Dillon talking to someone. I unlatched the door, stepped out, and saw Pike chatting with him.

“Hey, chum,” Pike said to me. He was wearing cargo shorts, hiking boots similar to Dillon’s and carried a daypack on his back, strapped along his naked torso. I was a little taken aback at how good-looking he was. Not that I was interested—I had Dillon—but one couldn’t help but notice. I hadn’t realized as much when we were at Woody’s.

He rolled an arm out of his backpack. “You mind watching this?” he asked Dillon and leaned it up against the pine tree.

“Not at all.” Dillon stepped closer to it.

Pike walked past me, punched me lightly on the shoulder, and went into the portable.

I walked over to Dillon. "The smell in there is awful." I went to the pine tree, caressed its needles, and smelled my hand. "Much better."

Dillon took a swig from the water bottle he had had strapped on his belt loop and then offered me some.

I touched my own, nearly full one, on my belt loop. "All set."

"You are a camel."

"You've got to conserve."

"Mine's nearly empty."

"Well, you can have some of mine, if you need it. We're heading back soon, anyway."

There was a rustle inside the portable. "Oh, man, this thing reeks!" Pike's voice echoed. The door kicked open. He was wiping his hands as he jumped down from the steps. He walked toward us and swept a flap of dark hair from his eyes with a flick of his head. He was still rubbing his hands clean. "Thanks." He pointed with his chin to his backpack. "I could've pissed in the woods, but those environmentalists..."

I smiled. "It's better if we go in the toilets. The acid in our urine does a number on the plants."

He looked at me as he bent down to grab his backpack and snickered.

"What's with the Blow Family?" Dillon asked.

Pike looked over at the toilet as he shimmied back into his day pack and chuckled. "Joe Blow, believe it or not, is the owner."

"Blow is a real name?" Dillon said incredulously. He had just clipped his water bottle back on his belt loop.

Pike nodded. "Went to school with them. Come from Bath."

"The Blow family from Bath, Maine," I said. "Hmm."

Pike started toward the trail. Dillon followed.

"That's Maine for you," he said.

Pike was heading back in our direction, and the three of us walked the mile back to the beach. At one point, I thought I caught Dillon staring at Pike's ass a little too long and felt a jab of jealousy, but I let it pass. The little tear along

Pike's shorts revealed a bit of his right butt cheek. It was hard not to take notice.

"Guys," Pike said, turning around and continuing to walk backward for a bit. "This way." He started up an incline, taking long strides along his way.

Dillon looked at me, shrugged, and followed him. As did I.

We hiked a few feet up the side of a small hill, which was overrun with brush. He stopped, and we huddled between the leaves of a buttonbush and some invasive knotweed. I could smell Pike's sweat.

"I wanna show you something," he said. He grinned and hiked up his shorts.

I swallowed. The hum of the street above us whirred.

Pike climbed up a little further. An empty plastic bottle of water fell down the hill. I was tempted to pick it up, but it slid down the embankment with Dillon's step.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Pike got up to the top, waved us on, and disappeared on to what I assumed to be our destination.

When I got up there, Dillon was climbing over a small metal guardrail. Pike was in the distance with his hands on his hips and was looking up. The Sagadahoc Bridge was a few hundred feet away.

"There she is," Pike said and pointed.

I looked up at the billboard. The guy I assumed looked like me had a sly grin on his face, a woman stood beside him, holding a barbeque branding iron that sort of resembled something you'd use on burgers. Stamped along the man's chest were the words, *Cut above the rest*. Below the couple was a plate full of hot dogs and hamburgers on top of a picnic table. A green field behind it faded off along the ad's edges.

Yankee Neighborhood Beef—Our Meat Beats... the Rest.

I stepped closer to Pike and Dillon to get a better look at the ad. "Wow. That's pretty suggestive. Beat... meat. But I still don't think I—"

Suddenly, Pike reached over to me, pulled my shirt and yanked it up. "Whoa!" He stepped back.

"Pike, what the hell!" Dillon yelled.

He saw my birthmark! I pulled at the bottom of my shirt, as if trying to hide behind it further. “What’d you do that for?!” I turned and walked hastily away.

“Dude, I’m sorry. I was just—”

I turned around. “Well, don’t!”

“I was just joking,” he said, in a more hushed tone, apparently to Dillon, but I wasn’t sure. I was heading back toward the hill, into the woods.

“I was looking for the brand... mark,” Pike added. “It was a joke!”

I jumped the guardrail and tore down the incline. I took it a little too fast and scraped up against a couple of thorn bushes, nearly tripping over a discarded hubcap. When I got to the bottom, I was out of breath. I leaned against a pine tree and took a couple of deep breaths.

“Evan! Evan!” I heard Dillon yelling. He was traversing through the same clump of thorn bushes as I had, as was evident by his curses. There was a rustle, and out he popped. “Jesus. It didn’t seem that thick going up.”

I was breathing less rapidly and stood up straight.

He came closer. “I didn’t know you were that sensitive—”

“I am.” I started toward the path that went back to the beach.

“He didn’t mean any—”

I spun around. “He lifted my shirt up, Dillon! The whole street could’ve seen me.”

Dillon stopped.

I turned back around and started walking again.

“Evan, you’re fine,” he said. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

I stopped. *Embarrassed? I’m not embarrassed.* I turned around. He was still standing in the same spot. “Is that what you think I am?” I started toward him. “Embarrassed?”

Dillon put up his hands and shrugged his shoulders. He shook his head, opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, and then stopped.

When I got closer to him, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and sighed. When I opened them, Dillon was in my face. He kissed me.

“You’re fine,” he said and kissed me again. “I don’t know the right words... I’m a writer not a... not a good talker. I fumble. I didn’t mean you were embar—”

“Shh.” I put a finger to his lips and kissed the tip of his nose. “You’re right. I am embarrassed.” I looked away and then back into his eyes. “And I shouldn’t be. I’m thirty-one years old and having temper tantrums like a little teenager.”

He grinned. “And that ain’t the only thing that keeps you acting like a teenager.” He put his hand on my crotch, and I instantly threw an erection.

“Umm. You keep that there, and you might just get a little surprise.” I put my hand on his chest and tweaked his nipple through his shirt.

Suddenly, Pike jumped down from the embankment. “Shit!” he said and put his hands out.

Dillon and I pulled away from each other.

Dillon was looking at the ground. I was wrestling with my shorts to make my excitement less noticeable, though the scare had done a pretty decent job at its abatement.

“Dude,” Pike said, “I don’t... do what you need to. I didn’t mean to scare you.” He looked back up the incline and then back at me. “And Evan, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...” He came forward. “Damn, you have hot abs!” He grinned.

I laughed. Dillon snickered, took off his baseball cap, scratched his head, and put it back on with the brim forward.

Pike stepped between us, put his arms on our shoulders and we walked a bit further. He still smelled sweaty. “Did you know I was the only kid in my class to stand up against the bullies that were picking on Jenn Sandown?”

Dillon looked over to me and furrowed his brow. “Pike, who’s Jenn Sandown?”

“Jenn Sandown used to be Jim Sandown.”

I looked over at Dillon and shrugged.

“Look, I know it’s not the same thing,” Pike said, taking time to address us both. “Trans, gay.” We took a few more steps, and he took his hands off our shoulders. “It’s just that it’s... it’s not a big deal to me.” He started down

another trail that went further inland and turned around. “Well, see you at Woody’s?”

“Thanks, Pike,” I said. “And sorry if I was an ass.”

Pike scrunched his face and waved a hand dismissively. “Not a big deal.” He turned and started to walk away, but then stopped and turned. “And I mean it. Killer fucking abs.” He slapped his naked stomach. “You gotta teach me your secret sometime.” Then he spun around and ran off.

Chapter Eleven

Dillon's hands were pressed against the small of my back. The cool metal of his dog tags dragged against the space between my shoulder blades as he pounded into me.

The night was cool but we were dripping sweat inside the tent. The campfire outside continued to roar. We had just finished watching the sunset, eating a dinner of sausage and shrimp paella, which I had made using a skillet over the flame. The bottle of wine we shared was left on the ground. I'd recycle it later.

We couldn't keep our hands off each other any longer and wound up naked in the tent, finding the dark of night best to avoid notice from the other L.L. Bean campers nearby.

"Jesus," I muffled into my sleeping bag, which I was biting. I lifted my butt to thrust harder against his drive.

He leaned down and bit the nape of my neck. My erection oozed as it slid across the flannel of the bag.

"Evan?" I heard.

Dillon got up, his hands grabbing hold of my waist again. I turned around, for I liked to see his face in ecstasy. His teeth were clenched around one of the stainless steel pendants of his dog chain, like he was trying to hold himself back from being too loud.

"Evan?" a voice said again.

I quickly flipped over on my back. Dillon's condom nearly ripped off. He fell over to the side.

"Evan? Are you here?" It was Ron. I could tell by the voice.

"Oh my God," I whispered. "It's my friend, the one that was supposed to come camping with me." I cleared my throat and then said, in a much louder voice, "Oh, hey, Ron. We'll be right out." I put my hands on my head.

"No rush," Ron said. "We'll just set up over by your car."

I looked over at Dillon and mouthed, "What? And who's we?"

Dillon was already grabbing his shorts from the bottom of the sleeping bag. He had pulled the Star Wars T-shirt back down from being crimped behind his

neck. He pulled off the condom from his semi-hard cock and threw it into the corner of the tent. "I thought he wasn't coming," he said, in a hushed tone.

"I thought so too." I put my feet through my shorts. "He said he'd pulled his back." I lay down to pull up and fasten my cargos. "He mentioned potentially coming, but I didn't think..."

Dillon threw my shirt to me. I sat up and put it on.

Ron's car was parked behind my Explorer. It looked like a BMW, but it was bigger than the one he had had last summer. I don't know much about luxury cars but it looked expensive. Ron spent money as fast as he earned it. And lucky for him, he earned a lot. The trunk was open. I walked around the back, but he was already putting his tent and belongings in the small space on the other side of our tent. "Hey, Ron," I said.

He turned around and smiled.

I put out a hand. "I see your back is better."

"It is," he said. He got down on his haunches and dropped the small cooler he had been carrying onto the ground.

There was somebody else, face first, inside their half-raised tent. Ron looked over at him and then back at me. He got up. "I tried calling you, but the reception sucks here."

"Oh, that's okay." *It is?*

The man in the tent popped out. "Evan? Evan McCormick?"

I felt like my eyes were going to bulge out of my head. "Gary?" I stepped back, and my shoulder hit the side view mirror of my Explorer. It was my ex.

Dillon came up along my left and put his arm around me. He had his baseball cap back on and looked as if he had spent a little time making himself presentable again.

Ron looked to Dillon, to Gary and then back to me. "You guys know each other?"

Gary stood up and came closer. "Well, yeah."

I looked at Dillon, then back to Ron. "Uh, we dated." I looked over to Gary. "We were... in college."

"Oh my God. I didn't—" Ron started.

Gary put his hands on his hips. "When you said his name was Evan it didn't occur to me." He shook his head. "What a coincidence."

I swallowed. "Yeah," I said, as Gary came over and gave me a hug.

"The gay world's a small one," Dillon remarked.

Gary and I had had fleeting contact over the past seven years. A few years back, we had bumped into each other in Boston and ended up having a beer at Faneuil Hall. He was out shopping for a suit, and I was walking to the train, on my way back from an Environmental Defense Fund lecture at the Boston Public Library.

It was so long ago that we had been together that there was nothing romantic between us. The distance of time had allowed us to talk, as friends, without an ugly past rearing up.

Ron stepped forward and extended a hand to Dillon. "Ron. Ron Beckham."

"Dillon. Dillon Deiss."

Dillon and Gary exchanged greetings, and I felt a sudden sense of awkwardness in knowing that every man I had ever had sex with was present before me—well, except for that circle jerk in high school.

I opened my mouth to say something, but hesitated. I wanted to say Dillon was my boyfriend; yet, despite our obvious attraction to one another, we hadn't quite established that, and I didn't want to initiate such an announcement in the company of my former sex partners.

"You're looking well, Evan," Gary said and then looked to Dillon who had removed his hand from my shoulder. "I mean... not like... well."

"Thank you," I said. "I am doing well." I looked at Dillon and said, "Really well."

Ron put a hand on my shoulder. "Money Bags, why don't we exchange something other than bodily fluids and have a toast?"

I choked on some spit.

We sat around the campfire. Ron pulled out a bottle of vintage Cabernet from Northern California, which he told us he had picked up on a trip to Napa a few months back. We sipped from metal coffee mugs I kept in my picnic

basket. Ron wasn't too pleased that Gary forgot to pack the wine glasses, but the mugs were fine.

"The firm opened a location in Portsmouth, New Hampshire last year, and I'm heading it up," Gary said. "Last time I bumped into you," he glanced over at Dillon and then back at me, "I was picking out that suit from Brooks Brothers in Boston."

Dillon took a sip of his wine and rested the mug, in hand, on his knee. "Love Brooks Brothers," he said, and his face flinched. His legs spread as he leaned forward. His upper back expanded as he took in a deep breath and exhaled.

I raised an eyebrow.

The fire crackled and popped. Ron leaned back and rubbed an ember into the dirt with his foot. "Gary and I have been seeing each other for a little over three months now." He took a sip from his mug.

Gary pointed a wavering finger at Dillon and me.

I nodded and crossed my legs. "Yeah." I looked over at Dillon. "We've been hitting it off pretty good. We work... worked together."

Dillon smiled, closed-mouthed, and went back to hang his head as he leaned into his haunches.

Ron took a sip from his wine, swirling the metal mug in small circles—presumably a form of aeration. "I heard about your former CEO." He shook his head. "Shame. You two all right?"

Dillon sat back. "We are." He looked over at me. "We're thinking about opening our own agency."

Ron stiffened momentarily, but then let out a slow smile. "Really?"

I picked at the sandal strap around my heel and nodded. "We're... we're looking into it." We'd only talked a little about it during our hike, bandying about the idea of converting my boathouse into a little office, but nothing was set in stone. However, we were evidently both on the same wavelength.

Dillon sipped the last of his wine and put his mug on the ground.

Ron reached over and filled it. Gary fished into a pocket, took out a set of keys and clicked a button. The trunk of the car popped open. "Looks like we need another bottle."

“Gary, is that your car?” I asked.

“It is.” He stood and started toward it.

I looked over at Ron. “I thought that was yours.”

“No, I have a Land Rover now, but it’s at home. Gary wanted to drive his new BMW.”

Dillon leaned back against the log. He spread his legs and exhaled. His face flinched again. I looked down at his crotch. His junk was bunched up, and he pulled at the leg of his shorts. I could see a bit of a wet spot that had stained the crotch of his corduroys.

I grimaced. *Oh, God, he must have blue balls.*

Ron rolled the empty wine bottle next to the one Dillon and I had consumed earlier. “We get along well, Gary and I. I’m sorry if this is awkward.”

“Oh, no problem,” I said, not taking my eyes off Dillon, whose pained expression grew on his face. “Gary and I are friends now. The past is the past.”

“Looks like you may have pulled your back too,” Ron said to Dillon.

Dillon chuckled and glanced my way. “Yeah, a little too much... working out.” He breathed slowly.

I put my mug down. “I should get him to bed. We had a big hike today and tomorrow is surf kayaking.” I stood up.

Gary stepped back into the light of the campfire. “You guys off to bed?”

I nodded.

Dillon stood gingerly, saying, “Yeah, I’m wiped and wined out.”

Gary held out the new bottle he had retrieved to Ron. This one had a different label than the one we had just drunk. “Looks like it’s just you and me.”

I could hear Gary and Ron chatting while Dillon and I lay atop our sleeping bags. We had tried to sleep but couldn’t. I heard what sounded like an empty bottle clink against another.

“You okay?” I asked Dillon.

He looked over at me and smiled. The whites of his teeth and eyes stood out against the dark of the tent. "I'm fine." The outline of his tanned skin faded into the edges of the night.

"Thank you for... for being you." I reached over and brushed back his bangs. His hair had grown out a bit—the normal spikes starting to droop. "Thank you for being cool with being around my ex."

He put his arm behind his head. "What's in the past is in the past. I'm cool with it. We all have exes."

I reached under the bag to touch him below and rubbed his inner thigh.

He spread his legs, flinched and exhaled. "Uh, I'm sore."

"Man, you really tighten up." I massaged his scrotum, moved a bit closer to him, and whispered in his ear, "You poor thing. I hate to see you hurting."

He bit his lip and moaned softly.

I grazed my hand up, touched the tip of his penis and it started to pulse in my hand. "I'm sorry we got interrupted," I said, still in a hushed tone. "I promise to make it up to you." I started stroking him.

He put his hand back down and closed his eyes.

I kissed his lips.

He leaned over and buried his face in my neck and bit tenderly on my ear lobe. He exhaled heavily. "Oh, God. That feels nice."

I continued to palm him while he thrust up into my hand. I kissed his neck and with my free hand, which was pinned behind him, I reached around and tweaked his nipple.

Faster and faster my other hand went.

He held his breath, as if trying to stifle any noise.

I slowed my tempo and stopped. He bucked, forcing himself into my soft grip. I took my hand back, spit into my palm and returned to pleasuring him.

He moaned something inaudible. His eyes rolled back, and he bit his lower lip. I loved seeing the look of ecstasy on his face. I felt myself seep a bit against his thigh.

I gripped him harder, my pace quickened.

His head slammed against the ground, and his hips thrust up. His face contorted and reddened. He was still holding his breath, and from the puff of his cheeks I thought his head might explode. His mouth finally fell open, and he let out a sigh that was quickly restrained with pursed lips as bits of his spunk hit him in the face, me in the ear and then more thumped onto the back of the tent.

He tried to catch his breath in slow, soft blows and turned to me, still panting. He wiped the spunk from his abs and with it slobbered in his hand, grabbed the stiffness between my legs.

I groaned quietly, and he kissed me. I writhed in joy as he brought me near completion. The excitement I had received from pleasuring him already had me on the brink, and his wet grip wasn't helping to bring me down.

But it was more than just his hand that made love to me. It felt like he stroked a cord deep inside me. I shivered and felt like a ball of yarn coming undone. I could taste his seed, which had splattered on his lips and now mine, as he muted my cries by covering my mouth with his.

When I came, I felt like each cell in my body burst from every crevice inside. The force appeared to warp time. I don't know if the intensity was from trying to hold back and be quiet or from having been pent up from our interrupted session—an unintended foreplay—or something else entirely. But it rippled out in wave upon wave of something more than just ecstasy. In it all, I felt the hum of a connection, an invisible tether between us. I could sense it. It was palpable. I could feel the power of something deep within him on the other end.

“I love you,” Dillon whispered, as he continued to kiss and nibble my lips. I continued to thrash beneath his grip, unable to speak. “God, I love you,” he said.

Chapter Twelve

We had just finished breakfast at Woody's and were in the dirt parking lot, when Pike pulled in. He was driving a faded red Nissan with a plastic sheet over the driver's side rear window.

I had my door open. Dillon was walking over to the passenger side and stopped. Ron and Gary were already pulling out of the lot. We were all heading out on a short ride to the beach to meet up with the group for our surf kayaking adventure.

Pike pulled into the empty spot beside us. A cloud of dust billowed behind his car. I went around to greet him. The door opened, and a loud rock song quickly silenced. "Dudes!" He was wearing a tank top and the same pair of cargo shorts from the day before, but was clean-shaven.

"Look at you," Dillon said. "You finally met up with a razor and some shave cream."

Pike rubbed his chin. "Once a week. Whether it needs it or not." He shut his car door. "Where you guys off to? You just eat?"

I clicked my keys to unlock the passenger side door. "Out for some surf kayaking."

Pike nodded. "Nice. The surf's rough today." He leaned and looked over my left shoulder.

"Great," Dillon said. "The novice over here doesn't need to be tipped into the cold Atlantic."

"Dude," Pike said, and pulled at his ear, "Did you dive into your breakfast?"

"Huh?"

He wiped the tip of his ear. "Looks like you got dried up egg on the side of your face and in your hair."

I felt my face go red. I touched my hair and felt the crust around my ear. *Oh, God. Dillon's...*

Dillon cleared his throat. "Well, we should get going." He put his arm around me and moved me back toward the truck. "We don't want to be late!"

“Oh my God. Do you think Gary and Ron saw it?” I asked, looking in the rearview mirror and wiping my ear with a napkin from the glove compartment.

Dillon was laughing, with his head tipped back, and holding his stomach.

“It’s not funny,” I said, put the napkin down and started picking the crust off my ear with the tip of my fingernails. “Jesus Christ, it’s like glue,” I chuckled. “What the hell do you eat? You shoot cement.”

He laughed even more. “I’m sorry,” he said between spurts of snickering. “I promise. I didn’t see it...” He snorted. “Or I would have said something.”

“Jesus, I must look like the whore of Maine.” I shook my head.

Dillon took off his baseball cap and gave it to me. “You need it more than I do.”

I put it on, backed out of the parking spot, and we left.

The five hour kayak trip ended in Bath, Maine, where we had dinner at a camp site and then were to be bussed back, in an hour trip, to our cars.

Gary and Ron sat in the rear of the bus. Since Dillon and I were late—we got talking during dinner—we had to sit in separate seats near the front.

We were still a little wet after flipping the kayak a couple of times. The first time, Dillon panicked, as he told the group at dinner, but afterward we worked well together and righted it in no time.

I was sitting next to a banker from Boston. His wife was sitting in the seat in front of us with a friend. Dillon was two seats behind me. Once I told the banker I had worked for Thoroughbred, he started in on me. I tried to tell him I was under order of the authorities not to reveal anything, but that didn’t seem to stop his inquiries.

After several minutes of inquest, I turned around to look at Dillon, who was in the back, standing by the bathroom. Gary must’ve been inside, as Dillon was talking to Ron, who was sitting by himself. Ron caught my eye and went back to talking to Dillon.

“Ponzi schemes,” said the banker, “in this day and age. You think they would have been a little smarter than that.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Dillon asked.

We were on I-95 heading home. It was getting dark.

“I didn’t think... it was just once. It wasn’t anything.”

He looked out the passenger window. “What?”

“You haven’t had one-night stands?”

He let out a sigh. “I’m not talking about you messing around with him.” He let out another sigh. “Now I don’t know what to believe.”

I put my head back. *Oh, God.* “I’m confused, Dillon. What did he tell you?” I was trying to think back to what I had told Ron that would have gotten Dillon so upset. “All right, I fucked him! We messed around, and then I fucked him! Does that make you feel any better?”

He leaned his elbow on the door, put his hand to his mouth and shook his head. “Well, that is certainly a surprise. But not really any of my business.”

Oh, God. What the hell is he getting at? “Dillon, I don’t... I don’t understand.”

“Evan, I don’t care so much who you’ve fucked in the past. Though I thought you told me you had only done Gary.” He spread out his hands. “But let’s just let that go. We’ve all had relationships. I don’t know why you had to hide it.”

“I didn’t mean to hide it.” I nearly swerved into the other lane, and the car beside me beeped. “I just didn’t think it was important?”

He crossed his arms. “Evan, I understand our relationship is new. We’re still learning about each other. But we need to be upfront and honest. It’s not about you fucking Ron.” He took a moment then went on, “Are you hiding something from me?”

The highway’s white lines flashed by at breakneck speed, while I tried to think up something encouraging to say but, instead, I laughed nervously.

“You know, I’m scared about this just as much as you are.”

I looked over at him. I felt a bit nauseous.

He looked me straight in the eyes. I had to look away to avoid veering into the other lane again. “You knew about the Ponzi scheme, Evan. Didn’t you?”

My mouth fell open. I took a quick glance at him and then went back to the road. *Ponzi scheme?* I shook my head.

“Evan, Ron said that not only did you know about it, but that you’re practically a millionaire.”

I swallowed. The truth was, I did have a decent net worth for my age—not quite a million. The Ogle stock helped me launch, literally, a small fortune. But I didn’t like people to know about it. I was afraid they might think differently of me. Like when I told Ron, after a few beers, that I was broaching the three-quarter-millionaire mark.

Dillon went on, “He thought I knew about the scandal too... that I was reaping benefits from it... my affinity for a good suit, for instance.” He sighed. “Then he told me you liked to cry poor mouth, so people didn’t know about your money.”

I jerked my head toward him. “What! I never said that.” I looked back at the road. “I’m not... I never took anything from Thoroughbred.” I slammed my hand down on the steering wheel. “I DIDN’T KNOW ABOUT IT!” My heart was racing.

He was silent.

“HE’S A FUCKING LIAR! I’m not that... wealthy.” I clenched my hair in a fist. I closed my eyes for a second but was afraid I’d get into an accident. I just wanted it all to go away. “I suspected the fund was... off... but never said anything.” I glanced over at him. “I had nothing to do with it.”

He sighed, looking out the window then turned to me. “Did you not joke with him last year about which was growing faster, the fund or your stock holdings?”

I pulled back into the lane I was veering out of, sighed and admitted, “I did.”

He looked away again. “This is just...” I could sense him shaking his head—*sense* because I was avoiding looking at him. “It’s too much too...”

Chapter Thirteen

Dear Journal,

Being raised with hardly any money, I guess I feel guilty for having some. My parents worked so hard, for so little. While I know my mom would be proud of me, I can't help but feel a bit of shame sometimes regarding my wealth.

I downplayed my net worth to Dillon and as a result broke his trust.

Everything had been going so well. We had a great time in Maine... until the end.

He said he needed time to think about things, which ultimately means we're on a hiatus.

God, please. I love this man. I would never hurt him. I would never lie to him. I just... I just didn't think it was necessary to tell him about Ron, for one. And then the other thing—well I can't even write about it for fear the Feds will steal my journal. But I didn't know about any wrong doing at the firm. I only suspected. I only had an inkling. Ugh!!!!

I told this to Dillon.

Now he's not sure he can trust someone that lies about his wealth, knew about—or at the least suspected something was amiss. Maybe he's right. Why should he?

I took the page from my journal, ripped it out, tore it to shreds and threw it in the fireplace. I didn't want any evidence of my suspicions left behind. I had reformatted my hard drive to get rid of the letter to Whitfield I had started. The one thing I couldn't get rid of was the conversation I had had with Ron the previous summer—the one about unprecedented gains and my sneaking suspicions. “Friggin’ traitor.” He was so damn conniving. Someone once told me, “He could talk a dog off a meat wagon.”

When I got home that night, after coming back from Maine, I called Ron, but he didn't pick up.

It had been five days since I had heard from Dillon. The roses he gave me were beginning to wilt.

When I meandered into Mrs. Johnson's backyard, her wine soiree and art show was in full swing. All five people were there.

Mrs. Johnson's art was definitely something she did out of love—they were sort of tacky. Her husband, who had passed away long before I had moved there, had left her well off, and her dabbling with paint was her new passion.

"Oh, Evan!" she said, coming over to me in a white gauze-like gown with sleeves that flapped behind her. She gave me a hug. She smelled of lilacs and alcohol.

A tall man, wearing a black vest, white shirt and pants that matched his vest, offered me a fluted drink of some bubbly-looking thing. I took it.

"You're just in time." She grabbed me by the arm and led me toward the boathouse she had converted into her studio. She stopped midway and leaned into me. "Where's your friend?"

I shook my head with tightly pursed lips.

She patted me on the shoulder. "Oh, dear." She gave me a sideways hug.

I took her arm, and we walked toward the studio.

Mrs. Johnson's studio was quite eclectic. It was painted yellow to match her house and the inside was stuffed with not only her paintings, but little tchotchkes she had picked up in her travels and couldn't find a place for in her house. There were also painted placards with witty and inspirational sayings on them.

I stepped inside. On the wall hung what looked like a roofing slate, painted with white and blue lettering.

Men are like chips... you can't have just one.

I chuckled. I hadn't seen that one before. Mrs. Johnson waved to someone nearby and went over to them. I headed to the window overlooking the lake. Another slate hung to the left of the window. This one was in purple letters, with a bottle of wine painted to the side.

Like a good wine our friendship grows stronger as we get older.

I reached out and touched it.

“You like it?” said a voice behind me.

I turned around. The waiter who had served me the champagne was holding out a plate of hors d'oeuvres. “Oh, I’m all set, thank you.”

He shifted his weight on his hip and smiled. “I was asking about the sign.”

I looked back at it and then back to him. “Oh, yes. You’re cute.” I put out a hand and spilled some of my drink. “I mean!” I shook my head. “The sign is very nice.”

He snickered and walked away.

I downed my glass of champagne. *Eck!* I grabbed a glass of red wine from the makeshift bar behind me. *Evan, he’s not even that cute. Why the hell did you say that?*

Mrs. Johnson appeared and took my arm while I took a swig of my wine. “Oh, you’re onto the Grenache, I see,” she said.

I shrugged my shoulder and let her lead me.

We walked toward the back room. It was small. She went in, and I hung out at the entranceway while people went through. I could see an easel in the middle of the room with a canvas draped over it. Mrs. Johnson went over to it and waited for people to gather. “Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you all for coming.”

I looked around. Maybe there were ten people.

Mrs. Johnson clasped her hands together, and her bracelets jingled. “Oh, so lovely to see you all.” She held out her hands. Her sleeves waved like the seventy-two inch sheer curtains I had in my bedroom when the window was open. “The Awakening at Conant Lake.” She pulled the canvas from the easel.

The audience gasped, which I assumed to be more out of respect than anything else. A few folks moved closer and blocked it from my view. “Oh, Ann, this is your best work yet,” said someone. “Stunning,” said another. And several more words of praise spilled forth.

I gulped back my wine. Waiter boy stood next to me holding out another. I took it. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” He winked and didn’t leave.

“Is it another lake picture?” I asked him.

He lowered his chin. “What do you think?”

I took another sip of my wine.

“Evan!” Mrs. Johnson called. “Evan!”

“Excuse me,” I said to waiter boy. I went into the back room. The handful of people in it made it crowded.

“There you are,” she said, raising her arm and jiggling her hand over the head of a lady with whipped-up hair the size of a Fiat.

No wonder no one can see. Her hair takes up the entire—

Mrs. Johnson grabbed my hand and pulled me in front of Fiat head.

I looked. My mouth fell open, and I put my free hand over it. I thought I might drop my wine, so I placed it on the counter next to me.

“You like?”

“It’s beautiful, Mrs. Johnson.” I felt a lump in my throat. “How did you...”

She leaned her head against my shoulder.

It was a picture of the lake, of course, but it was unlike any of her other paintings. This one’s colors were much more rich and vibrant than her other works. The blues feathered into bursts of purple in resemblance of the water and looked, quite honestly, like something I’d seen at the museum. But that wasn’t all. I could see my roof and my boathouse in the distance. She pointed to it and nodded. And then, most importantly, in the forefront was the dock with its missing slats. Sitting down with their feet in the water were two men. They looked just like Dillon and me.

“I hope this doesn’t upset you too much,” she said, as I dabbed away a tear from the corner of my eye.

“Oh, no.” I swallowed. “Not at all.” Behind the canvas, I looked out the window. I could see the pier and the roof of my house in the distance. I bit my lower lip as it began to tremble. I could picture Dillon and me sitting with our feet in the water—him kicking at my calf, as her picture had captured. I thought I might burst into tears.

I stood outside trying to collect myself.

“Evan, I want you to have it,” Mrs. Johnson said, as she emerged down the two steps and out into the yard. The gathering inside were whooping it up over God knew what.

“Oh, I can’t, Mrs. Johnson. It’s your best work.” *They were right. It was her best yet.*

“I’m old, Evan.” She sat down on a rusted bench that looked over the water. “Nobody wants my paintings.”

I sat down next to her and heard Detritus bark from within the main house. “Mrs. Johnson, that’s not true. You—”

She tapped my thigh. “It doesn’t matter.” She put her hands out, palms up, toward the lake saying, “I don’t need anyone. I have this.” And then she clasped her hands together across her breast. “Except maybe for Detritus. Did I ever tell you why I named him that?”

“He was discarded on the side of the road like a piece of trash.”

“I guess I have told you that story.” She tapped my knee. “See, I am getting old.”

I chuckled and put my arm around her. “Thank you. Thank you for painting it.” I nodded and looked out at the lake. The sun was beginning its descent behind the trees.

She got up. “My dear, you’re very welcome. Now hopefully one day I’ll get to meet that fine gentleman.”

Chapter Fourteen

As I walked back to my house, I thought of Dillon and how Mrs. Johnson had managed to capture the moment when I fell for him. While the painting was wonderful, it couldn't fix the broken tether between Dillon and me. I wanted to call him, but from the way we had left it he needed the time.

"Hey, stranger," said a voice from the woods at the end of my road.

I walked toward it. *Dillon?* My skin began to tingle. I quickened my pace. Then into the flood of the streetlight, stepped the waiter from the party.

I stopped.

He was smoking a cigarette, flung it to the street and ground it in with his foot. He blew smoke into the air. "I know. It's a bad habit." He stepped forward and extended his hand. "Name's Jacob."

I hate smokers. "Evan." I shook his hand.

"I parked down here." He tilted his head toward a silver thing at the end of road. "Mrs. Johnson wanted me to leave room for her guests."

I nodded. I didn't feel like making small talk. Besides, I still wasn't very good at it.

"She's sick, you know."

I grimaced. "Mrs. Johnson?"

He nodded. "Cancer."

I touched my lips. "How do you—"

He put his hands in his pockets. "I heard her telling someone before the guests arrived."

I turned and looked down the street, toward where her house would be, if I could have seen it from that vantage point. "I had no idea." I turned back to him. "Why are you telling me this?"

He shrugged. "I thought you'd want to know."

I rolled up a sleeve of the white cotton shirt I had on. "If she wanted me to know, she would have told me." My stomach tensed. "She would divulge it to me if she wanted to." I rolled up my other sleeve and stepped forward.

Jacob put out his hands. "Easy! Easy." He started toward his car. "I was just striking up a conversation. God, people are so touchy."

I stood my ground, watched him get in his car and leave. "Asshole," I said, as he drove down the street.

When I got inside I checked my messages. *Nothing*. I flipped on my computer to see if I had gotten an email from Dillon. *Spam*. I double checked my cell phone to see if I missed a call. *Nope*.

I whipped off my shirt, stripped down to my underwear, and began doing pushups. I was nearing one-hundred, my triceps were screeching, my chest aching, and my stomach cramping when my cell phone rang. My arms gave out and I fell face first onto the floor. I rolled onto my back, rubbing my chin. I could hardly get up, my muscles were so tense.

I crawled to the coffee table and grabbed my cell phone from it. I didn't recognize the number. "Hello?"

By the time I got to New Hampshire, it was nearing midnight. I pulled into the Portsmouth police station, just south of Mill Pond, and parked beside Gary's BMW. I got out and went inside.

Gary was arguing with a police officer at the front desk. "He's my friend." The police officer asked him to sit back down. Gary flung his hands into the air and then saw me. "Evan!" He came toward me. "Thank you for coming. I didn't know who else to call." He looked over his shoulder, then back at me. "They won't tell me what's going on."

"But he called you?"

"He did. I was his one and only call." He put his hands on his hips. "Go figure. I didn't know what to do."

Suddenly a camera crew burst through the front door.

A police officer jumped from his desk. "YOU CAN'T COME IN HERE! There's nothing to report."

Gary and I looked at one another.

The reporter started toward me. "Mr. McCormick!" she looked back at the camera crew. "It's the guy from Thoroughbred."

Gary put his arm on my shoulder.

“Mr. McCormick, we hear Ron Edelman was the conspirator behind the Ponzi schemes plaguing the North Shore.”

“What?” I stepped back.

Gary held out a hand to stop them from approaching.

I continued, tripped over a bench, and everything went black.

When I awoke, I was lying in a hospital bed. Gary was by my side. He said something about a concussion and grabbed my hand.

“I’ve never been in a hospital, as a patient, before.” I looked around. Then it started coming back to me. “Ron... what happened?”

Gary leaned forward and held my hand tighter. “Ron was... He was the chief architect of the Ponzi scam. The one your office fell under.”

I sat up, my head pounded. I didn’t know what to say and just shook my head.

“Evan, I think that’s why he befriended you. And me too. Looking back on it, he was fascinated with my white-collar crime experience.”

I lay back in the bed. The room was beginning to spin. “Last year, he asked me if Whitfield and my boss had suspicions about the fund.” I grabbed the metal railing on the side to hoist myself up. “I said I had my own suspicions...” I gazed out the window. “They were clueless. They just liked seeing the fund grow.”

Gary handed me a cup of water. “You’re okay. You have nothing to worry about it. You just monitored the reporting. You never funded it did you?”

“No!” I took a sip from the straw he held out. “They had opened that account when I was still in high school.”

“It was all a sham.” He put the cup back down on the table.

“Apparently, funded by Ron’s lies.”

I was released from the hospital the following morning. Gary drove me back in my Explorer. He said, he could take a cab back to Portsmouth to get his car later.

“You’re not going to take a cab,” I said. “I can drive you in the morning. In fact, I can probably drive myself back now but someone,” I said, emphasizing the last word and looking at him while he drove my Explorer down I-95, “won’t let me.”

“Evan, I’d feel better if I did this. Besides, the doctor said little activity today.”

I leaned my head into my hand.

“All this time, he was trying to get me involved in his business.” Gary huffed. “I told him I was too busy at the firm.” He looked over at me. “Thank God.” He went on and on. “Should’ve known... player... never bought me anything... teeth got in the way when he... not that great in bed—”

“I’m getting a headache.”

“He’d just lie there. Sometimes he’d get me good, if he had a few pops in him.” He slowed down. “Wait. What’d you say?”

“Gary, you’re giving me a headache.” I was remembering why we hadn’t worked out.

“You think it’s the concussion?”

“No, it’s your mouth.” I flipped the radio on to classical music. “Can we just have some peace and quiet for a bit? We’ve both been through a lot. I know. It’s a lot to process.”

He was silent. Debussy filled the air.

“Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap.” I turned the radio down, but I loved Debussy, so I kept it on just a tad.

“You still like that classical shit, huh?”

“I do. You still like rap?”

“Uh huh.”

I rolled my eyes and was grateful when I saw the sign for Massachusetts.

“Can we put on 94 point—?”

“No!”

My cell phone rang and vibrated inside my pocket. I had a hard time getting at it, with the belt around my waist, but managed to take it out before it went to voice mail.

“DILLON! Oh my God.” I picked up the call. “Dill?” I didn’t even hear what he was saying. I didn’t care. I just listened to the sound of his voice.

“I’m sorry, Evan.”

I couldn’t wipe the grin from my face. I could see it in the reflection of the window.

“Evan, you there?”

“I’m here. I’m here.”

“Can you believe it?”

“No, no I can’t.”

“Cock whipped,” I heard Gary mutter.

I reached over and slapped him in the stomach.

“Ow.”

Dillon went on offering more apologies, and how he felt foolish for doubting me. I just heard bits and pieces; I was more excited to hear his voice. *Ron this... Scandal... Ron that... Front-loading stocks...*

“Can we get together?” he asked.

“Yes! When?”

“Tonight?”

Suddenly the car swerved into the right-hand lane. “Gary! Jesus!” I fell against the door. “What in the name of Christ are you doing?” I pushed the hair back from my eyes and huffed. “Not you, Dill. And yes, I would love to get together with you tonight.”

Gary came to a stop on the shoulder. He bent down to look out the window.

I shook my head. “Dillon, I’m sorry. Gary has suddenly lost it or some—” I looked out the window. My mouth fell open, and I dropped the phone onto my lap.

Gary got out of the car first. He looked up at the billboard, then back at me. “It’s you,” he mouthed. The cars passing by shook the car. I got out, taking my phone with me. “Dillon?” I said into it. “You’re not going to believe this.” I looked up at the billboard. It was the model that supposedly resembled me. In his hand was a hot dog. His chiseled torso was shirtless, his hair neat and

combed, except for a spit of it that rose up prominently on the side. The message read:

Something about Evan... It's not just the cowlick that makes him cute.

Yankee Neighborhood Beef - Get Your Protein from the Meat That Can't Be Beat.

Chapter Fifteen

Dillon and I sat next to each other on my leather couch.

“I still can’t believe you wrote those ads,” I said.

He scratched his ear. “You’re not mad?”

I rubbed my chin. “No, I’m... I’m not mad.” I shook my head. “I’m just shocked. All this time.” I rubbed my temples, my headache was returning.

“I told you. Peter and I had planned on starting our own agency.”

“I know. I get it.” I rested my head onto the back of the couch. “It wasn’t Corridor Marketing. It was Peter and you.”

“You’re mad.”

“I’m tired.”

“I’m sorry, Ev.” He grabbed my hand. “Sorry for not believing you... about Ron.”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry—”

“No, no I... Part of it was me feeling guilty about hiding my involvement with Yankee.” He gazed at his lap. “I transferred my mistrust, and when you told me...” he lowered his voice, “you had been with him. I just—”

“Shh. I’m sorry.” I brushed his hair. He had it cut again. It felt bristly under my touch. “I should have told you.”

He gazed into my eyes.

“Dillon, I do have quite a bit of money. But...” I put my hand over my heart. “God’s truth, I invested well. I got some money from my mother and my grandmother—twelve-thousand dollars to be perfectly honest—when I turned eighteen. And with it, I bought into Ogle during their IPO.”

The toilet flushed and out walked Gary. “Well...”

I leaned onto the arm rest. “You sure you don’t want to stay? We’ll sleep on—”

He put his hand out. “You two lovebirds have some making up to do. I’m gonna go get my dick sucked at—”

“Gary!” I put a hand up. “We don’t need the details.” *Another reason why we split up.* “Just not in my car, please.”

He chuckled. “I’ll leave your car for you at the police station. It’ll be there tomorrow afternoon.” He dug my keys out from his jeans’ pocket. “You never know, I might get lucky at the club.”

I grabbed the cup of green tea Dillon had made me. “Just text me when it’s there. We won’t go up ’til later, anyway.” I stood up. Gary gave me a hug and tapped Dillon on the shoulder.

“Thank you, Gary,” Dillon said.

He smiled, opened the door and left.

Dillon and I moved to the kitchen. We were hungry, and he wanted to make us something.

He leaned into the fridge. “I suppose you don’t want any eggs?” He turned around and grinned at me.

“What the hell—I could always use it as hair gel.”

We didn’t wake ’til ten o’clock the next morning. Dillon was cuddling up against my chest when I awoke. The sun shone in at the edges of the window where the shades didn’t meet.

I stretched. Dillon mumbled something, drooled on my stomach, and put an arm around me. I kissed his head. His hair still smelled like he had freshly shampooed it. I probably smelled like a hospital and decided to shower before he got up. I lifted his arm off me and slowly eased his head from my chest. He snored and fell over onto his side of the bed.

I got out, stepped quietly into the master bath, slid the door shut and started the shower.

The hot steam felt good. I lathered, shampooed and rinsed, and sat on the bamboo shower seat that folded down from the wall. I let the hot water pulse against the back of my neck and shoulder blades, as I leaned on my haunches with my head hanging down.

The master bath door slid open.

I rubbed the steam off the glass shower door. “Morning.”

He scratched at the crotch of his Andrew Christian underwear. “Were you going to let me sleep all day?”

“You needed the rest,” I said, my voice echoing.

He held a finger up to me—as if to wait a minute—went back out to where the sink was and closed the sliding door. After a few seconds, he opened it and came back in.

“What was that all about?” I asked. He went to the toilet.

“I had a little gas. I didn’t want you to hear.”

I laughed. “You are the cutest damn thing.”

He stood over the toilet and started to pee. His underwear was down around his thighs, and he held his hands on his hips. He yawned. “You should be the one that overslept. You need your rest, Mr. Concussion-Man.”

“I’m fine.” I turned slightly toward the wall. Even though the glass was foggy, I didn’t want him to see the rise he was giving me.

He flushed. “You got any mouthwash?”

“Under the sink.”

He left and went back out to the sink area.

I shut the shower off, slid open the door and grabbed a towel.

He gargled and then came to me. He kissed the crook of my neck as I wrapped the towel around my waist.

“Dillon.”

“What?” he husked and pressed his crotch against mine.

The towel didn’t stay wrapped around me long.

We didn’t even make it to the bed. We started toward it, with our lips locked and hands groping against hardened muscle, but only got to the sink before we had to do something about it.

We wound up making love on the granite countertop with a towel ripped from the wall and placed under me. I leaned back on it while he penetrated me. He didn’t even get to pull his underwear all the way down. I watched him thrust into me—his reflection in the full-length mirror on the opposite wall. His butt flexed over the strap of his blue Andrew Christian underwear. I clawed at his glutes and pushed him deeper into me.

We came together—our lips locked and my legs wrapped around his waist.

I was so sweaty, I needed another shower. We took one together. I washed the semen from his penis. The condom—hanging over the edge of the waste bucket—held the rest.

It didn't take long for him to get worked up again. I pushed him up against the wall, then down into the bamboo shower seat and took him in my mouth.

When he shot, he screamed so loud I thought I felt the sliding glass doors vibrate. And I came without touching myself.

We were ravenous afterward.

I made us blueberry quesadillas with fresh berries I had picked along the lake the day before. The blueberries sat on a thin layer of cream cheese that I spread on top of the quesadilla. I seared it all in a frying pan. Dillon ate three. I had one, and cheated on my nondairy diet.

After breakfast, we went for a walk along the lake. Halfway around, we stopped at the dock that Mrs. Johnson had painted with us on it. I told him of her portrayal of us. He wanted to see it, so we went through her little white gate and into her backyard to visit.

Detritus was happy to see me. Mrs. Johnson was out watering her flowers. She was wearing a green robe and her hair was up in a bandana. I thought about what Jacob, the waiter, had told me about her illness. She did look thin and frail, but I wasn't sure if that was just me reading into something that wasn't there, or Jacob's gossip actually being true.

"Oh I'd love for you to see it, Dillon," she said. Dillon helped her down the short path to the rear of the cottage.

The picture still leaned against the easel that held its debut; the canvas draped behind, with its edges resting on the floor.

Dillon put a hand to his heart and told Mrs. Johnson how much he loved it. I thought I heard his voice crack when he mentioned the kicking of the calf.

Mrs. Johnson tried to give it to us, but I couldn't take it. I told her I'd prefer to see it there. And she elbowed me in the side and made me promise to visit more often.

Chapter Sixteen

A few months had passed and fall fell over New England. I pulled up to the house. I loved autumn in Massachusetts. For some reason, it didn't seem as dreary and cold as Michigan was this time of year—or perhaps the reason I felt better was because the situation with Thoroughbred was no longer lingering. The news had finally died down about the Ponzi scheme. My boss was indicted, along with Ron, and both were serving fifteen year prison sentences for fraud and illegal banking. Apparently, Ron's brother had turned them in to the authorities. Ron purportedly confessed to him, in private, that the fund was really “one big scheme.”

Dillon's car was parked out front. The hood was up. “Will wonders ever cease? Mr. Marketer is taking a crack at changing his own oil.” My penny-pinching efforts were beginning to rub off on him. Before I had left for the market, he told me he was going to “look into” changing it himself, instead of paying the dealer. I offered him a coupon from the SpeedyOil down the street, but he refused. “Honestly, doing it yourself is a waste of time. You could make more from writing ads...” I started, but he put up a hand saying it was good for him to learn.

I took the groceries from the back of the Explorer and walked toward his car. He was practically inside the engine. I admired his butt sticking out. He had a foot up on the bumper. “Look at you, being all manly and butch,” I said and threw the bag on my hip to free my hand. I looked around and then squeezed his crotch.

“HOLY SHIT!” He jumped and slammed on something inside the engine.

“What's going on?” Dillon asked. He was standing on the front porch.

I looked back over to the car. Pike was holding his head, blood dripping from the top.

I dropped my bag of groceries.

I stood over the kitchen sink. The eggs I had bought for Mrs. Johnson were smashed. I pulled them from the bag to get at the loaf of wet bread.

Pike sat on the living room couch with an ice pack on his head. Madeline—the busty, woman from the office—sat next to him. Since Pike had gotten us the Blow Family account, Madeline and he had been seeing each other.

“Pike, I’m really sorry,” I said, again.

“Don’t mention it.” He dabbed a couple fingers to his forehead and looked at them. “It’s stopped.”

Madeline’s shoulders quivered. “I just hope his grip wasn’t as good as mine, otherwise I might be out a boyfriend.”

Pike laughed. “Hmm. Now that you mention it.”

Madeline slapped him playfully.

Dillon brought the trash barrel over to the sink. “I’m sure he could teach you a thing or two.”

“Dillon!”

Just before Christmas, Dillon moved in. The lease for his apartment in Danvers was about to expire. He had been spending most of his time at my place anyway.

I looked down at Dillon’s credit card statement and sighed. “You owe five thousand dollars to Brooks Brothers?”

“Four-thousand nine hundred...” He peered over the edge of the statement I still held.

I pulled it back. “Seventy-eight dollars and sixty-three cents,” I added and walked toward my computer. I looked down at the bottom of the statement. “At twenty-one percent interest!” I turned and glowered at him. His eyes were reminiscent of Detritus when he wanted a cookie. I sighed and dropped the statement to my side. “I’ll pay it.”

“You’re so good with money, Evan.”

I sat down at my computer. “I’m an accountant, remember?”

He was leaning against my chair.

“You know how much credit card debt I have?” I started to hold up my hand to make a zero but stopped. I knew I needed to restrain from criticism. I knew I could be a little too extreme when it came to saving. I turned around in my chair. “It’s not that you can’t afford it, Dillon. You make excellent money.”

“We...”

I chuckled. “We. We make good money.”

He tousled my hair. "You better be careful, or I might just give you another shot of hair gel."

I patted my hair back down. "Don't get me going again."

The back door opened and in walked Madeline. "Oh, hey, boys. I've got to use the little girl's room." She walked down the hall and into the bathroom.

"No problem," I said. The phone rang, and I picked it up. "Conant Marketing. This is Evan." Dillon sat down, spread eagle, on the chair next to me. "Oh, hi, Mr. Blow." I leaned on Dillon's knee. He was wearing a gray suit and looked very handsome. "Oh, yes, the team will be out next week." I hit my keyboard so the screen would unfreeze and looked at the spreadsheet I had been working on. "We're just running the numbers now."

The other line rang. Dillon got up. "Madeline!"

"I'M IN THE BATHROOM!"

I covered the phone and mouthed, "Dillon."

He shook his head and picked up the other line. He didn't like answering calls.

I talked to Joe Blow—the founder of the portable toilet outfit in Maine—about the team's plans for the following week, wrapped up our conversation, and hung up.

Dillon was walking with the phone crimped between his ear and shoulder. He grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl and started to peel it.

Madeline burst out from the bathroom. "I'll be glad when you get the cottage plumbed."

"I know," I said, clicking at the computer. "In the spring, I promise." The phone rang again.

Dillon shot Madeline a glare.

I waved a hand at him dismissively, to which she laughed. "Don't let him boss you around," I said.

"You kidding me?" She blew Dillon a kiss as she opened the door. "He ain't gonna get my panties bundled," she said and left.

"Conant Marketing." Through the window I watched Detritus gallop beside Madeline. He loved playing in the backyard. "She is. Hold on for one second, and I'll transfer you."

Using only her finger and thumb, Madeline tried to grab the tennis ball out from Detritus' mouth. His slobber no doubt encased it. He wouldn't let go. She wiped her hands together gingerly and started to walk away. He finally dropped it in front of her and ran away. He looked back, as if to make sure he still had her attention. Madeline picked up the ball delicately and threw it toward the shore. Detritus went after it.

I banged on the window. She looked up. I pointed to the receiver I had in my hand, and she went inside.

"That was the hospital," Dillon said behind me.

I spun around in my chair.

"Chemo treatment is done. She'll be ready at two."

I nodded.

Mrs. Johnson died on a surprisingly warm afternoon in late January. Her sister had flown up from Florida and had spent the holidays with her.

She didn't want a service. Her request was to have her ashes mixed with her husband's—which she had kept in an urn on top of the mantle—and sprinkled into the Conant Lake.

Despite our January thaw, the lake was frozen. We promised Mrs. Johnson's sister that we'd keep the ashes until she returned in the spring.

I took *Awakening at Conant Lake* out from her bedroom. I had put it in there so she could see it from her bed. She made me promise her I would take it when she passed.

Dillon locked up her house and we drove the short distance to the end of the street. We had just come back from dropping Millie, her sister, off at the airport.

Peter and Madeline's cars were parked at the end of the road. Dillon needed to get in to join them on the conference call with Yankee Beef. It wasn't necessary for me.

Detritus greeted us at the door.

A year and a half after we sprinkled Mr. and Mrs. Johnson's ashes in the lake, Dillon began acting a little funny. One afternoon he decided we needed to go shopping at the grocery store, near the old Thoroughbred office.

We were driving in his new Audi—new to him, anyway. The lease on his Volkswagen had expired, and I refused to go into debt for the Jaguar he was eyeing. I suggested a Ford Hybrid that I had read about in *The Environmental Consumer*. We settled on a year-old Audi Diesel.

“Dillon, why are we going here? You know I like Henry’s Market much better.”

“They have a sale on... on the granola you like.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Granola? Since when are you a penny pincher?”

He glanced at me. “Since you taught me.” He pulled into the parking lot. “Now that we have a new car, I guess we should be saving more.”

“Mm hmm.”

We got out of the car, but instead of going in, he started toward the street.

“Dillon.” There was a small group of people gathered with their backs to me. “What are you up to?” I followed after him.

He turned and waved me on. “C’mon, slow poke.”

I noticed Madeline first, then Pike and Peter. “This isn’t making any sense,” I said to myself.

They looked up at the billboard—the same one where I had seen the first Yankee ad—then back at me.

Dillon walked back and grabbed my hand.

As the billboard came into view, I put my hand to my mouth and choked back the lump in my throat.

This just keeps on getting better. Marry me, Evan?

I looked back at the ad. The words were cast over a larger-than-life replica of Mrs. Johnson’s painting.

Madeline was wiping her eyes.

Dillon got down on one knee.

I could hardly see him through the tears in my eyes. “Yes, Dillon. Of course.”

Epilogue

The beach's water was cool for Florida. I strolled along the shore. The Gulf's waves crashed at our feet. Dillon walked beside me. He had his shirt off, mine was still on.

"The weather is perfect this time of year," he said.

"It is, isn't it?"

We walked further. There were throngs of people, seemingly enjoying the escape from the North's brutal winter.

I bent down to pick up a beach rock. "Look how smooth—" I felt a dribble of cool water slide down my neck. I arched an eyebrow at him.

Dillon shrugged a shoulder. "What happened?"

"Mmm. Hmm."

"Hey, look at that one." Dillon bent and picked up a shell.

"It's alive. Let it be."

He whipped it back into the ocean. A group of kids played in the distance.

We happened upon a sandcastle being destroyed by the incoming tide.

"God, I used to love making sand—"

I kicked a little water at him as he bent down to inspect it.

"Mr. Evan Capri McCormick-Deiss."

I shrugged a shoulder. "What?"

He shook his head.

We got back to our spot. The tide had come in and was threatening to wet the hotel's oversized towel we had been using to lie on. I moved it out of the way while Dillon re-staked the umbrella. From the couple's boom box behind us, The Pretenders' "I'll Stand By You" started. I smiled and kicked off my sandals.

Dillon chatted with them, something about living in New England and being glad to be out of the snow.

I sat under the shade of the umbrella, hugging my knees.

As the song moved into its final chorus, Dillon walked over, pointed with his head to the water, and waded in.

I followed after him. We stood with the water slapping at our shins.

A group of kids frolicked on a raft, and Dillon started toward them, in exaggerated kicks, that sent water my way.

I flinched slightly as the spray wet my T-shirt. "Hey, hey!"

"Hey, what?" He splashed me again, with a grin.

"You're asking for it." I placed my hands on my hips.

He came a little closer, and I kicked water at him, hitting him in the face. "Ah! Bull's-eye!" I laughed.

He bent down and with his cupped hands he drenched me.

Suddenly we were in an all-out water brawl. We must've looked like we were having fun, because The next thing I knew the group of kids on their raft joined in.

"Mr. Deiss, you're in for it," I said. The kids took my place soaking him while I stepped back, peeled off my wet and clinging T-shirt, heaped it onto the sand, and ran back to join them.

No one seemed to notice the birthmark on my chest. Why should I?

The End

Author Bio

*Rick Bettencourt hails from Boston's North Shore where he learned to speak without pronouncing the letter "r"—and say things like "tonic" when he wanted a Coke, or "bubbler" when getting a drink from the park's water fountain. A few years ago, Rick was adopted by a Cairn Terrier named Bandit. Recently, Bandit moved Rick, and his husband of several years, to Florida to escape the New England winters and avoid being engulfed by snow drifts when going about their business. When Rick is not being walked around the block by Bandit, he might be found working on a story about gay men or some underdog character triumphing over adversity. Or you might catch Rick watching *The Walking Dead* or *Once Upon a Time*, reading something like *Running with Scissors* or some personal development book, or writing to a group of folks—he likes to call them fans—from his mailing list. In addition, Rick enjoys theater, art, old postcards, and amusement parks. He also loves to hear from his readers.*

Contact & Media Info

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MATING BALANCE

By Gina A. Rogers and Kyle Adams

Photo Description

A man standing alone and naked in the woods next to a tree looking into the distance. He has messy, finger-length, brown hair. His sleek, well-defined muscular body, looks quick and flexible. Tan skin, pouty lips, high cheekbones, and a straight nose. Broad bulky shoulders and a defined V leading down to close cropped crotch and thick thighs.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am a shifter looking for my mate and need to satisfy the overwhelming animal urge that dwells within me.

After many years prowling the globe looking for him, I believe my search is over.

I can smell him near me, I can feel him near me but, I want to feel him inside me!

Sincerely,

S.M.

P.S. Please, No BDSM. I'd prefer his mate NOT to be a twink or of that variety. I'm thinking same size guy or bigger.

You choose the animal.

Extra points to you if you go the full hog and leave nothing out.

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, shapeshifter

Tags: shifter, men with pets, steamy, playful, funny, dark, mates, armpit, sex outside, explicit

Content Warnings: It's dark until the sun comes up.

Word Count: A satisfying 26,400 words!

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Cover by the talented and amazing Enny Kraft

MATING BALANCE

By Gina A. Rogers and Kyle Adams

Chapter One

“Ten more minutes,” Troy whispered to himself. He was on the edge of mania, his voice strained and jagged. His mouth was so dry. The recycled air pumping through the cabin of the airplane burned the raw tunnel of his throat as he slowly inhaled and exhaled. His beast was riding him hard. Stomach clenched and coiled tight. His insides twisted to a nearly unbearable level of tension and pain. There, just beneath his skin, was pure relief. He could shift, let the monster deep within out. It would be so easy. So *easy*. Battling his nature, fighting against an inevitable outcome? That was hard. And it was utterly fucking useless. Hope was a fickle bitch.

Fuck hope and fuck this. *Shift. Let go. Do it. Shift. Do it.* Troy shook his head, foolishly thinking he could dislodge those thoughts. He fought so hard for control, a fight that grew more difficult with every second that ticked by. *Shift. Give in. Feels so right. Shift. Do it.* Troy was losing the battle. He should have known he wouldn't be able to hang on to himself. Even back when his human side had ruled, flying always put his beast on edge. It was unnatural. Humans were unnatural. *Shift!*

Troy's claws shot out, gouging into the armrest he'd been gripping. Sweet relief! He wanted to tear and shred. A deep growl grew in the pit of his stomach. He stretched and twisted his neck, still fighting the change. The smell of sweat and fear nearly drove him insane, the scents like drugs to the predator within. Except something was wrong. It was the sharp tang of his own fear, the salty smell of his own sweat he scented. He was one of the largest cats in the world! *He didn't fear. He was fear.*

His beast was confused, and that tiny opening was all Troy needed to rein himself in, looking around to see if any of the other passengers had noticed. Thankfully, not many people had chosen to travel at four o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday. Troy released the breath he'd been holding, as well as his death grip on the seat.

Ten more minutes. Minutes were a human concept, and they allowed him to quantify, set parameters. Human. He was a human too, damn it. He wanted human things: a home, a partner, coffee. He wanted to fight for these things, but was overwhelmed by his failure and feelings of impending doom.

At twenty-nine, he was running out of time. He was the last living member of his family and, if history repeated itself, he would not make it to his thirtieth

birthday. It was the reason he'd spent the last five years roaming the world, desperately searching for his mate, convinced it was the only way to free himself from his family's curse. He could still hear his grandfather's voice on the day he died, a deep and warm baritone, telling him, "Save yourself, Troy. Find your mate. Don't let her win. You must save yourself."

Of course, little did his granddaddy know that his mate would not be female. Troy never told him he was gay. Not that he thought for a second that his pap was a bigot, he just didn't want to burden him any further. His grandfather was the only adult member of Troy's family left. As a human, he didn't fall victim to the horrible spell that tore Troy's family apart. His father, a grown shifter, had immediately succumbed to his animal and gone feral. Troy and his brothers were temporarily spared, until they reached their full maturity around age thirty.

Despite having lost his own wife in an auto accident, and then losing his daughter and son-in-law just two years later, his grandfather remained strong and did all he could to raise his grandsons. It nearly destroyed the man when Troy's two older brothers fell to the curse. A year later and the heartache had become too much for him. He gave up, and died of natural causes. Troy was the last remaining shifter in their line, so he had let his granddad believe what was easiest, allowed him that little bit of peace. But the truth was that finding a male mate would be even more unlikely than finding one at all.

Troy's stomach lurched, letting him know that they were descending. Seven more minutes and he would finally be off this suffocating tin can from hell. "Ten minutes after that and I'll be out of the airport," Troy mumbled. The trip had been a special kind of hell, but it was nothing compared to the exhaustion and utter defeat of the last five years.

He'd run through mountains and jungles, combed beaches and traipsed across deserts. And that was only the places he went in his animal form. For the last year, Troy avoided shifting as much as possible. Each shift, every second he allowed his beast control, brought him closer to the edge. Not wanting to risk going completely feral so far from home, he remained human and continued to comb the world's busiest cities and every small town and village he could reach.

And still he was returning home empty-handed. The weight of that realization hit him in the gut like a twelve-pound bowling ball traveling a hundred miles an hour. His skin prickled and his eyes constricted. Troy bent

over, clutching at his head as his beast screamed to get free. He never came closer to tearing a human to shreds than he did at the moment when a flight attendant shook his shoulder. "Sir, we've landed. Do you need assistance de-boarding?"

Troy leapt from his seat, ripped his duffel bag from the overhead compartment and bolted off the plane. He didn't have any luggage to claim. He hadn't bothered, wouldn't need any of his things much longer anyways. The only reason he even brought a carry-on was to keep from seeming suspicious, which he certainly wasn't thinking about as he practically ran through the terminal. With the time zone change and travel time, it was just after lunchtime at the Seattle/Tacoma airport, and it was busy enough that Troy, thankfully, didn't attract much attention.

Bursting through the doors to the outside, he frantically looked around for the car he hired to drive him the two-hour distance to his home in the mountains northwest of Leavenworth in Washington State. Locating the driver holding the sign for Fadale, Troy walked towards him on trembling legs. So exhausted. So tired of fighting. He settled back against the leather seat of the car and waited to reach his final destination. His body had never ached so bad in his entire life, a deep, weary kind of ache. No, maybe that was how his soul felt. His body was energized and drawn tight, ready to spring. Troy swore he could feel the pressure to shift in every single cell.

Not much longer. Hang on. Just hang on. Eyes closed, Troy lulled himself into a place of peace, aided by the white noise of the car's revved engine. His mind wandered along the roads and sidewalks of the last five years. He'd seen some amazing and beautiful things and met people who had profoundly impacted his life.

Across the back of his eyelids, he could see the things he loved: The contrast of elegantly scrolled wrought iron and brick next to bright neon signs advertising jazz and blues on Bourbon Street in New Orleans. The purplish-pink of the skyline as he'd watched the sunset from atop the London Eye. The wrinkled and hunched old man who refused Troy's offer of a ride along a hilly dirt road in Scotland and, instead, invited Troy to park his rental and walk with him.

A knife speared Troy's chest. At least, that's what it felt like. He arched his back and let out a pained hiss. Warm tears trailed down his face. "Nothing!" Troy's voice sounded like it'd been dragged across gravel. When the driver

raised a questioning eyebrow at him in the rear view mirror, Troy tried to cover his outburst with a cough. Satisfied that he wasn't having some kind of fit, the driver turned his focus back to the road. Troy looked away, watching the scenery fly by in a blur, and whispered to no one in particular, "Nothing. I've got nothing left." He had no mate to share these experiences with, no future in which he would tell these stories to his family. His mind raced and his pulse quickened.

These episodes were coming more and more frequently. Troy's thoughts were like shattered glass: broken, displaced, sharp and dangerous. There were brief moments of clarity, and he had taught himself to use them well. Put the window down. Shatter. Cold air on his face. Shatter. Claws piercing his thigh.

It was the first time he'd used such extreme measures, but the burst of pain worked as he'd intended, breaking through the chaos of his thoughts and bringing the whirlwind of glass shards to a halt. He'd drawn his own blood. The sight held his attention, mesmerized him. The bright red of his blood, his life force, spread across the material of his jeans.

It was a macabre image, and yet, it was beautiful. The key to the prison that was now his life lay hidden in the small red droplets. He would have to spill more of his own blood, but he'd made the choice that was best for him, and he would follow through with it before it was too late to free himself. He loved his animal side dearly, but he loved his humanity too, and the idea of being a slave to one without the other was simply unbearable.

It was only a matter of hours now. The car approached the long, winding driveway that led to his family home, a large A-frame log cabin that sat in the middle of nearly one-hundred acres of forest in the Wenatchee Mountains. Twenty minutes later, he paid the driver and dragged his weary body inside.

Home. It was amazing how the last five years hadn't impacted that at all. This simple structure, one of billions across the planet, had always been, and would always be, home. Troy breathed in deep, pulling in the familiar scents of pine, old quilts and the slightly sour smell of the natural cleaner his mother had always used. He could also smell the lingering scent of the young shifter from his pride that he paid to make the hour drive once a week to check on the place.

The pride was spread out all across northwestern Washington due to their solitary and territorial nature, but Troy had refused to hire some local human company. Pack was honorable, dependable and loyal. He wanted everything to remain perfect for the moment when he first walked his mate through the door.

Troy fell to his knees and let out a scream that was part animal, part human and all anguish. Throat raw, he slumped to the floor. Even his beast was too weary to fight him. The silence that now surrounded him was twofold, both calming and agitating. How could it have been only five years since he'd last heard his grandfather's voice? Six years since he'd last joked with both of his brothers, and nearly twenty since the boisterous laughter of his parents filled these rooms.

Troy crawled the thirty or so feet across the hardwood floor to the plaid couch that sat facing a large stone fireplace. He lay on his back on the worn cushions, one hand thrown above his head and one resting on his heart, and stared at the ceiling. No! He jerked himself upright. He would not—could not delay. Even now he could feel his awareness splintering, spreading like cracks across thin ice. Soon there would be nothing left to stand on and he would fall into the murky water and drown.

Well, the fuck he would allow it to happen to him. He was going to take control and jump, sink to the bottom with his free will intact. Hands on his knees, Troy pushed himself to standing and turned towards the small home office next to the kitchen where he stored all his important papers. Passing the end table, he reached to right the photo frame he vaguely remembered knocking over in his haste to sit up.

Troy couldn't help but smile, despite the situation, at the photo. It was taken on one of their many family treks into the mountains. As the protector, Troy's dad almost always went in his shifted form while his mom played mediator, navigator and photographer. On this particular day Troy and his brothers, Travis and Tristan, were pretending to be mighty hunters.

They stalked their father for miles before finally slaying him with their mighty twig swords. Their father had been a good man, putting aside his ego and allowing them to pose for a picture standing above his "lifeless" body. Of course, they hadn't expected him to jump to life right at the moment the shutter clicked, capturing their hilariously startled and terrified little faces.

With a heavy sigh, Troy gently placed the photo back in its rightful place. Driven by melancholy and a need to relive the bittersweet past, Troy continued around the room, pausing at each picture frame and relishing the sharp slice of pain that came at reliving all those precious memories. Above the mantel hung the last photo taken of the entire family together.

Troy had wanted to destroy it, but his grandfather refused to allow him to. "Cecilia loved your mother and all of you very much," he told Troy. "You can

see that love in the picture she took. People do regrettable things out of anger and grief. Don't repeat her mistake and destroy something beautiful for the same reasons."

Troy listened to his pap at the time, but he had never been able to really forgive Cecilia and still felt the urge to rip the photo to shreds. He had once considered Cecilia, their closest neighbor, an aunt. She always had the time and energy to play with them and loved the mountains as much as they did. It wasn't until after the fact that Troy learned the truth.

Cecilia's great-grandfather was a Leshy, a type of woodland sprite, and some of his magic and love of nature and mischief had been passed down to her. It was the reason she'd moved into the isolated forest, and also the reason she and Troy's mother had become best friends. His family's shifter nature called to Cecilia. She had such a way with animals as well as plants or anything that drew its energy and life force from the earth. But she was a Leshy, if only in part, and those bastards could never resist causing trouble.

Cecilia often lured his mother into the woods to play games. They climbed the highest trees, crossed the widest ravines and just simply played like children. Troy could remember his mom coming home smiling and flush from her time with Cecilia. Until the day she simply didn't come home at all.

The spirited Leshy was always challenging and daring Troy's mother. He knew now that it was a part of their nature to cause mischief and trouble. That particular day, Cecilia bit off more than she could chew. She begged and cajoled her best friend into exploring one of the many large caves throughout the mountain. When they came upon a mother bear and her two cubs, Cecilia arrogantly thought her magic would save them.

She told Troy's father that she tried to connect with the bear and calm her, but in the end, her magic wasn't strong enough to counteract the bear's instinct to protect her young. When the bear attacked, his mother shifted to defend Cecilia, and it cost her her life. Reality isn't anything like fiction. Shifters are not immortal, nor do they live longer or heal faster. They are simply humans who share their spirit with an animal and can take that animal's form when the spirit called them.

"Dad," Troy spoke aloud in the empty room, simply wanting to be able to call for his father one more time. Looking at the photo above the mantel, it was hard to reconcile the image of his father smiling so bright it lit his eyes up with the way he looked only a week later. Troy's memory of the moment his dad

discovered the death of his mate sent a chill down his spine. The man Troy knew disappeared instantly, replaced by a raging, anger-fueled beast. He went utterly berserk, raging through the house and destroying everything before fleeing into the woods.

Cecelia had tried to go after him, tried to apologize, which had been a mistake. Mind clouded by grief so intense, the kind only the severing of a mating could cause, his father turned his fury outward. Knowing how connected Cecelia was to the woods and nature surrounding their homes, and knowing that destroying any part of that would hurt her dearly, he set out to cause her the maximum amount of pain he could.

It was a well-known fact amongst them that Cecelia shared a bond with all things of the earth, but she had a particularly strong love for an old, majestic sycamore tree that stood over one-hundred and fifty feet tall at the top of the mountain. The ear-piercing scream Cecelia let loose when she felt the first chop of the axe still haunted Troy to this day. By the time his father set the tree on fire, Cecelia had been reduced to a listless pile of flesh and bone, her connection to the tree causing a visceral reaction.

But that wasn't the worst of it. The fire set by Troy's father quickly burned out of control. The man had not been in his right mind, or else he never would have risked the catastrophe. Ten acres of Cecelia's land burnt to the ground before the flames had been halted. And still that wasn't the worst part. A gray wolf family, the same mother and cubs that Cecelia thought of as her children, had been trapped by the fire and perished.

Thinking back to those pivotal moments in his life as an adult whose current emotional state was raw, Troy gained a new perspective. Still staring at the photo Cecelia took, Troy spoke words he never thought to say. "I'm sorry, Cecelia. You lost a lot that day, too." As soon as he uttered his apology though, his mind turned to what happened next, and once again his anger surfaced, and his thoughts began to shatter.

Troy's fist snapped out and connected with the rough stone of the wall. Fucking Leshy bitch destroyed everything he held dear. Yes, her precious tree and wolves had been destroyed too, but only after she killed his mother. And what she'd done next had changed Troy's life forever. It was absolutely unforgivable. He would never forgive her! Troy swept his arm across the mantle, knocking everything to the ground before letting out a roar that could be heard for miles around.

Snippets of that horrible day began to flit through his brain. Cecelia standing in the middle of their yard, hair wild and clothes dirty and unkempt. The empty eyes of his father as he marched down the porch steps towards her. “You are not welcome in my home, you murdering bitch,” Troy’s father had roared.

Troy’s pulse rocketed and his skin prickled. The slideshow in his mind sped up and, with each image, his muscles tightened. “I loved her, too,” Cecelia yelled back at him. Leaves and twigs swirled around her like a mini tornado. Troy remembered feeling the charge in the air, remembered a sense of energy being pulled towards the center of the vortex where the insane Leshy stood. He’d been scared. His beast hated that feeling, even if it was merely a memory, and doubled its efforts to be released.

Troy fought with all he had. He’d learned in the past year that if he allowed his animal spirit to force a shift, he had less control over coming back. He planned to take one final run in his animal form, but it would be on his terms. He had so little control over his life at this point that he hung on to what he could in a white-knuckled, iron grip.

Needing to establish order, Troy went to the kitchen and retrieved supplies to clean up the mess he’d made. He set the heavy wooden sculptures his grandfather had carved back on either end of the stone mantel. Several photo frames still lay on the floor, surrounded by shattered glass. He swept the shards into a pile and carefully picked up the frames. He cut his finger on a slender piece of glass when he removed it from one of the frames.

Blood welled and, once again, the sight caught and held his attention. So much was hidden in that red drop of fluid: his eye color, his height, his history. His curse. Never before that fateful day would he have thought something as permanent and primal as his DNA could be altered. Until that day, when his father and Cecelia’s words grew more and more heated and spiked with hatred.

“It was just a stupid fucking tree!” The words his dad spoke acted like a knife, wounding Cecelia’s fragile state and slicing her open, allowing all her anguish to gush out.

“I curse you, Roger Fadale.” The Leshy’s words were hushed but held the weight of a thousand choirs. “Without your mate you are nothing but a beast, and so a beast you shall become, but always will your human side be aware.” Cecelia’s voice grew louder, ominous. “Always will you know what you have lost. Until the day you perish and the earth you mock reclaims her due.”

And with her last word, the whirlwind exploded outward. Troy swore he felt the charged air actually pass through him. He still thought that might have been a possibility, especially knowing that every cell in his body, as well as those of his father, grandfather, and brothers, had been affected that day by the curse. Now when he looked at his blood, all he could see was a cage.

His father was affected almost immediately. Troy's grandfather believed the curse worked so quickly on him because his father's mate was dead, and with his mating bond severed, he had no way to fight the curse. Up until his death, the man swore the key to it all was for Troy to find, and bond with, his mate. Five years of effort and countless hours of searching had proven to be fruitless, and Troy was out of time.

Resigned, Troy licked the blood from his finger and finished cleaning up the mess. He would leave everything in order for his pride. The house and all the money he inherited from his parents' life insurance policies for their "accidental" deaths would be left to the pride, with the caveat that they continue his work in learning about Leshies and ridding the world of their dangerous and deadly magic.

Troy had made a point of learning everything he could about their kind shortly after his parents' deaths. He knew how to find them, knew the mark they all carried and knew in most cases they were just as fragile as humans, having very little of the pure magic left after generations of mixing with people and, occasionally, even shifters.

But by the time he was both old enough and strong enough to search for more of Cecelia's kin, his brothers had begun to show signs of going feral and all his efforts were focused on finding a cure. Each death Troy suffered through, every single time he had to hold one of his brothers down to keep them from hurting themselves, the hundreds of times he looked into his brothers' eyes and saw fear and desperation, had been like the swipe of a whetstone against a sword. His hatred for the Leshy was sharper than any blade on the planet.

Not wanting to get his animal worked up again, Troy set about finalizing his plans. He pulled all his paperwork from the safe and laid it out on the kitchen counter. He booted up his old laptop and used it to write an email to the leader of his pride, scheduling it to be sent the next day. His final act was to strip out of his clothes, methodically folding them and placing them on his bed, before walking out the back door.

He wanted one last run. One last time of sharing the thrill of a chase, the smells of the earth and the glory of being free with his animal spirit. Despite the situation, he loved his beast. It was as much a part of him as the human. He would never give up either side of himself. And that was the crux of the matter. Taking a deep, cleansing breath, Troy shifted.

He loped and he stalked and he ran. And ran. Glorifying in the stretch of his muscles, the familiar mountain air against his fur and the feel of his claws digging into the soft earth. He took everything in as he circled his family's vast property. When he came to the top of the mountain where his entire family was buried, he lay on the slight mound of his mother's grave and let out a scream only his kind could make.

When the sun began to set, Troy lumbered to his feet and slowly headed east, towards the small stream that divided his property from the now abandoned land that once belonged to Cecelia. He wanted to taste the pure, untouched water one last time before he made his way south to the fifty-foot cliff that overlooked the solid, jagged outcrop of stones at the bottom of a large ravine.

Maybe it was Troy's imagination, but he swore the air grew stagnant and foreboding as he approached the stream. Crouching down, he lapped at the cool water. It was the last thing he would do before running full-on towards the cliff and over the ledge. He rose on all fours, closed his eyes and raised his chin high. This was it. He drew in a deep breath and held it.

His eyes flew open and the air whooshed out of his lungs. He breathed in again. And again. There, on the air, the smell of pine and morning dew. It rolled across his tongue. It was the sweetest, most wonderful taste in the world. He took off running, following his nose and his instincts as they led him closer and closer to his mate.

Chapter Two

Seth Marster inserted his key into the lock as stealthily as possible. Slowly and quietly, he turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. It was barely open an inch before he could hear the thudding patter of little feet barreling his way. He slipped inside just as Kashmir and Silver, his two ferrets, came rushing out to greet him. Trying to sneak into the house was a little game they liked to play, but it didn't matter how silent he tried to be, they always knew when he got home.

This time he even parked about a half mile down the stone driveway from his house so they wouldn't hear his truck. It obviously didn't make a difference, but he still enjoyed trying to catch them by surprise, and he simply loved having a chance to casually stroll the rest of the way home surrounded by the beautiful mountains.

Kashmir and Silver each scurried up one of his pant legs until they reached his shoulders. They bumped their heads under his ears and along his jaw. "I missed you guys, too," he cooed, rubbing each of them under their chins. When Seth first moved out of his parents' house and into this secluded place in the mountains of Washington, he knew he wanted a pet to keep him company. Of course, he'd been thinking about a dog or maybe a parrot he could teach to talk. When he walked into the store in Seattle though, something about the ferrets called to him. They were energetic and mischievous, and that was right on par with his own personality, so he'd taken them both.

It was a decision he would never regret, even as he noticed his spare house key was once again missing from the table by the door. Oh well, he couldn't blame his girls for trying to entertain themselves while he was gone. He always felt bad keeping them cooped up inside his cottage whenever he had to go into town or be out where they couldn't go. Better to pen them inside though. He couldn't risk losing them by letting them run around in the yard on their own all day. Even with him there, a hawk would occasionally swoop down and attempt to snatch one of his babies. At least they were litter trained, which meant he didn't have to put them in a cage when he left.

Although, caging them would spare him having to hunt around for the damn key, not that he didn't have a pretty good idea of where it might be. Kashmir and Silver were little thieves. They loved to take anything they could carry off in their tiny jaws, especially if it was all shiny. Thankfully, they were very

predictable thieves. They always stored the items either under his bed or beneath the sofa in the living room. Seth chuckled out loud. He usually forgot where he put things anyway, so it often turned out to be helpful knowing where to look for his stuff.

Seth walked further into his home, both ferrets still sitting on his shoulders, seeking attention. Kashmir was making dooking noises in his left ear. She'd always been more vocal than her sister, Silver, who was content sitting on his right shoulder, licking and bumping against his finger.

"I'm going to shower and get out of my work clothes, and then we can go play outside!" he told them. Talking to them like they could understand him was habit. And, honestly, he wasn't totally convinced that they couldn't. Sure, they never talked back, but he'd always felt like he could communicate with them, and animals in general, on a deeper level. "I'm probably just a crazy tree-hugging kook-a-doodle, like the rest of my family," he mused.

Seth came from a long line of environmental activists, horticulturalists and veterinarians. His father was a landscape architect who specialized in natural landscaping and his mother, a pet shrink, or animal psychologist, as she preferred to be called. He blamed them for being ostracized as a young child until he was old enough to figure out he probably shouldn't tell people he could talk to animals or that plants had feelings, too.

Mom and Dad always humored him though, and never made him feel crazy. Seth guessed that was what parents did, and he loved them very much for it. Moving out had been a difficult decision, but Seth had gotten antsy over the last few years, feeling like he was missing something. When he got the chance to buy this house, he knew it was the right decision, both personally and professionally.

Seth's parents had obviously been disappointed when he decided to follow the path to becoming a successful artist rather than continue in the family business of working with nature. It helped that the focus of his work was the earth and all its beauty. He painted wildlife scenes, abstracts of anything that caught his eye, and anything he found beautiful and inspiring. When he'd first brought up the idea to his mom, she'd tried to talk him into something else, but eventually accepted it was what he was meant to do and got behind him one hundred percent.

His parents were always understanding and patient. Seth kind of thought it came with being a hippie type. He remembered some of his childhood antics

and the sheer amount of patience his mom and dad had as he rummaged through the fridge for a drink. Like when he was eight and their dog, Buster, promised he only wanted out front to pee and would absolutely not chase the mailman. Well, Buster did chase the mailman, who panicked and started running around screaming for help. Seth's dad had to pick up the mail at the post office for two months afterward.

Then there was the raccoon that was tired of living in the trees, or so Seth's seven-year-old self thought the animal had been trying to tell him. He'd also thought letting the raccoon move into the spare room was a good idea. His parents woke up in the middle of the night when they heard a crashing sound coming from the kitchen. Thinking someone had broken in, they called the police, who ended up capturing the animal and turning it over to animal control.

Seth had gotten in trouble for that one. Not for "talking" to the raccoon, but because they had been so upset at the animal's inhumane capture by the cops. Of course, that was nothing compared to the trouble he got into after the skunk incident. He had to give up his allowance for a year to go towards buying all new furniture for the living room. Then there was the incident with a lizard, which ended up living in their walls for two weeks. The stories just went on. Seth placed his empty glass into the sink and smiled to himself. He had been a handful and was lucky he had such great parents. A sibling would have been nice, but thinking back on all his antics, he was pretty sure he understood why he was an only child.

Walking into the living room, Seth scooped his ferrets up by their bellies and set them on the back of his couch. Kashmir hissed in displeasure at being set down. "Hey, stop that! Give me twenty minutes and we'll go play." He was pretty sure Kashmir understood him when she narrowed her eyes, looking annoyed as she hissed again. Simply because he thought animals could understand him, and he them, didn't mean they listened. He rubbed both of them behind their cute little ears and said he'd be right back before heading to the shower.

He grabbed a clean towel out of the linen closet between his room and the tiny bathroom. And he meant *tiny*. It was the smallest bathroom he'd ever seen, smaller than the bathroom in his parents' RV or the one he used on the airplane on his way to see the Brazilian rainforest for the first time. At least it was up-to-date and cheery, even if he only had room for a toilet, a pedestal sink and a small shower stall.

Moving into the cottage in the woods three years ago was the perfect solution to his wanderlust, and the surrounding area provided plenty of inspiration for his art. It had needed a lot of work before it felt like home. No one lived there for many years and everything was out of code. The structure itself had been well-built and was still solid. He gutted the inside and had to replace all the windows, many of which had broken, letting in all types of weather and animals. He hired someone local to update the plumbing and electrical, but installed the natural bamboo flooring in the kitchen, bathroom and main part of the house himself. In his bedroom, he splurged and bought wool carpeting because he liked how it felt on his bare feet.

Seth stripped out of his hiking clothes, tossing his organic cotton T-shirt carelessly on the bed and letting his cargo shorts lay wherever they landed after he kicked them off. He knew that before the water even warmed up, Silver and Kashmir would drag everything into a pile under the bed so they could burrow into it. It was part of the reason he always went commando. The idea of his babies putting his underwear in their mouths and then sleeping on it? No.

Seth carefully stepped under the warm spray of water, contorting his body just right to avoid banging his elbow against the wall or ramming his knee into the glass door. It had taken him several weeks to learn the trick to getting clean without injuring himself. He wasn't a small guy. In fact, many of the men he dated remarked on how tall and broad he was. That was the second thing that drew people to him; the first was always his creamy skin and fiery red hair.

Speaking of hair, he ducked his head under the spray to wash away any dirt and grime. The original showerhead only came up to his chest, but he'd been able to have that raised when they redid the plumbing. His next project would be extending the bathroom. He secretly hoped someday he would be able to use the ol' conserving water bit to talk his boyfriend into sharing the space. Remodeling would mean he'd lose some space in his bedroom, but it would be worth it.

After his shower, he put on a pair of comfortable drawstring shorts and slipped on a snug green tank top. He liked feeling the sun on his skin. Soaking in the rays made him feel like his battery was being recharged. His cottage was secluded enough he could get away with just wearing nothing, except he didn't relish the idea of his fair skin burning in all the most uncomfortable places.

He also worried about someone from town stopping by unannounced. Then the whole town would start calling him "The Nudist Hermit" instead of just

“The Hermit”. Seth guessed he had earned that nickname. Everyone in town was nice enough, but he still preferred animals over people most of the time.

Too bad that didn't help him get any closer to finding his hypothetical shower-sharing boyfriend. Finding that person he could be himself around, someone who understood his bone-deep need to be surrounded by nature, seemed more and more impossible in today's high tech, urban world. His previous relationships had never lasted long, usually ending right around the time the weather turned cold and nasty, and hiking was no longer the postcard perfect novelty it started out as for most of his boyfriends.

The last guy he dated, like many of the ones before him, was into having fun and not taking anything too seriously. He had walked out on Seth after they spent a night trapped on the mountaintop by a surprise snowstorm. Seth had enjoyed the cold, crisp air and taking photos of all the clean, white snow contrasted against the darker landscape, but Joel had hated every second of it and refused to ever go again, stating, “My ass does not look good covered in goose bumps.”

Seth laughed for an hour at how ridiculous that statement was. It was another problem he often ran into. He was a happy guy, loved having fun and tried not to take anything too seriously, but when he dated other happy, fun types, he found they were incompatible. Many lonely nights he spent sitting in one of his Adirondack chairs out back, daydreaming about the perfect man for him, and for the most part, his consciousness always envisioned the guy as tall, dark and brooding.

He'd come to think that was really what he needed, a guy that was serious. One that only Seth could get to let loose. He wanted someone with a secret smile only he knew how to provoke, a smile just for him. Seth started looking for this type of guy, but his current hometown didn't offer much in the way of gay men. Even finding a casual friend with some perks was nearly impossible. On a few occasions, he'd met an out-of-town camper or day hiker that fit the bill. but they only ever wanted to hook up, seemingly desperate to get rid of his chatty ass once they'd used it.

Seth sighed as he walked downstairs to gather Kashmir and Silver for some playtime. For now, his left hand and his small, but impressive, collection of toys would have to be enough for him. He opened the back door calling out “Ollie Ollie Oxen Free”. Kashmir and Silver raced out into the yard. There was a nip to the gentle breeze brushing against his skin. Spring in the mountains of

northern Washington wasn't that warm, but the cold had never bothered Seth. The grass under his bare feet was soft and comforting as he trailed after his rambunctious ferrets.

He took a deep breath and smiled. Despite having spent the entire day hiking and photographing anything that caught his eye, this was the most relaxed he felt all day. His yard was like a sanctuary. When he first arrived, the entire area around the cabin was overgrown with wild raspberries and a mix of thick weeds.

It had taken him, with the help of his dad, the better part of two years to get everything the way he envisioned it. He was pretty sure his gardens would make the people at Disney weep with envy. Seth took a moment to spin around, taking in the space that was all his. He felt completely at peace and connected to—well, everything.

The sound of Silver having a fit brought him out of his reverie. He laughed as he watched his girls fight over their favorite hidey-hole, a tiny hollow garden gnome Seth had hidden amongst the junipers that ran along the small decline that led from his stone patio, down onto the lawn. He'd cut a hole out of the back of the figurine so they could hide inside. He'd put extra effort into creating spaces for Kashmir and Silver to enjoy as well, finding creative and aesthetic ways to include gizmos and playthings into his landscape.

This was their favorite time of day, right before the sun set, when it was still warm-ish and light outside. Seth made sure he set aside this hour every day to bring them out to play. He went over and dumped Kashmir out of the gnome before running away towards the open lawn, looking over his shoulder to see them galloping after him. He threw himself down onto the soft grass face first, enjoying the feel of the ground underneath him. He swore he could feel tendrils of the earth's energy flowing into him.

That was, until all he could feel was sharp little claws and noses digging at him. His girls loved to tickle-fight and knew exactly where all his most ticklish spots were. Today Silver went for the skin behind his knee while Kashmir went straight for his armpit. Seth squirmed and laughed until he couldn't take it anymore. Carefully dislodging them, he got to his feet. Turnabout was fair play.

In the center of the yard was a large kidney-shaped garden. Seth planted things like Echinacea and black-eyed Susans there, as well as his favorite and most colorful annuals. He loved seeing the bright purples, yellows and pinks. The birdbath in the middle of the bed he'd picked for its earthy beauty. The

bowl was ceramic and large, with a thick rim and a few inches of depth. It rested on a pedestal of wood that had an intricate carving spiraling from the base all the way to the top of the basin's edge.

Standing next to the bath, Seth clicked his tongue a couple of times to get Kash and Sil's attention. When they looked up at him, he pulled his hand out of his pocket and dangled a small plastic ball that rattled. "Wanna play a little game?" he asked, deepening his voice to sound creepy, like the killer from *Saw*. Too bad it came out sounding more like Christian Bale as Batman. Not an attractive sound. The girls raced over towards him but, rather than tossing the ball for them, he dropped it in the center of the water, making a tiny splash. The racing ferrets scurried up the birdbath's pillar and came to a dead stop at the top, where they perched along the rim and glared at him.

Neither of them liked to get wet, so they both reached the top and just sat there, studying the situation. Silver turned her head to make eye contact. Seth just smiled as her beady little eyes narrowed, seemingly saying "You're an asshole." She turned back towards the water and dipped her front paw in, using it to flick water at Seth. Message received. Seth didn't have to stand for the abuse. The first wet splatter of water hit him, but he managed to dodge the rest by leaping around. Seth laughed at the thought of someone seeing him like this, like some kind of psychotic ballerina doing pliés and pirouettes around the yard.

Kashmir, seeing what her sister was up to, joined in the fun, but instead of trying to splash Seth, she flicked the water at Silver. With a hiss of disapproval, Silver launched herself at Kash, who took off like a furry little rocket. They chased each other around the rim of the birdbath several times before Silver attempted to outsmart her sister by stopping and changing directions. Kashmir, surprised when she saw Silver coming right at her, tried to turn around too but ended up ungraciously dumping herself in the water.

She squeaked and started scurrying out of the water, but then must have remembered the toy floating in the center of the pool. Just as she neared the ball, Seth snatched it out of the water. He chuckled at the sight of a sopping wet Kashmir and a pissed-off Silver giving him the evil eye. He swore Kashmir harrumphed while her sister seemed to say "What did you do that for?"

"You didn't think it would be that easy, did you?" Seth answered the unspoken question. He took off running when both Silver and Kashmir bolted down the pedestal onto the grass, darting full speed towards him. "This is

Sparta!” Seth yelled before kicking the ball across the lawn. As the girls raced each other for the toy, Seth broke into a quick little dance; one he called the Ferret Don't Give a Crap Dance. He jumped back and forth and tried to imitate the tiny dooking noises ferrets make. It wasn't like anyone was around to see him, and it felt good to just act crazy and uninhibited.

When the girls came running back towards him, Silver with the toy in her mouth, he leapt in front of her and scooped her up, taking the toy from her mouth before sitting her back down in the grass. As much as she whined and hissed, he knew she actually liked playing keep-away. This game, along with hide-n-seek and tag, were their favorites.

Seth took off, running to the very edge of the yard before swinging around and heading in the opposite direction. About halfway back to the patio, he pretended to trip, falling to the ground and letting the toy fly out of his hands. Getting to his knees he threw his head back and exaggeratedly screamed, “Noooooooooooo! My Precious!” into the dimming sky.

He collapsed forward and smacked his fist against the ground, continuing his Oscar-worthy meltdown while chanting “Why” over and over again. Kashmir and Silver both liked it when he made noise and acted crazy. They always seemed to know when he was just playing and when he needed a cuddle. Giving up on his Smèagol impression, Seth rolled over onto his back and looked at the sky. “Damn, I love it—” He was cut off when a dripping wet Kashmir ran across his face, her soaked fur getting in his mouth. He sat up, coughing, and wiped at his face with the back of his hand. “That was really gross, Kash,” he scolded the ferret, who he swore snickered at him before taking off to play some more with Silver.

While his babies entertained themselves, Seth took the opportunity to walk around and enjoy his gardens. He inhaled the fresh scent of his honeysuckle bush, enjoying the sting of nettle against his leg when he brushed by it and ran his hand over the soft petals of his favorite tea roses. He refilled his many bird feeders, as well as his squirrel feeder and salt lick. When that was all done, he grabbed his remote control monster truck from the ferrets' toy bin he kept on the back porch and plopped down in the grass to play.

When the sun finally began its descent behind the trees, Kashmir and Silver returned and crawled into his lap. He set them on his shoulders and got up to return his truck, before making his way to the stone slabs he strategically placed along the far eastern edge of his yard where the sun's rays remained the

longest, warming the stones' surface. He sat cross-legged on the smooth, warm surface and placed Kashmir and Silver each on their own smaller stone. They ended every evening the weather cooperated sitting here, soaking up the warmth and watching the sun set on another day and recharging for the next one.

For some reason, tonight Seth found his eyes flicking to the large empty stone next to him. When he and his father had designed the landscaping for his place, he'd included the extra stone for the partner he'd hoped to someday find. Seth's thoughts turned wistful, his relaxed mind conjuring up an image of a tall, dark stranger with golden eyes and rich brown hair.

Seth hadn't realized he'd closed his eyes until Kashmir and Silver nearly attacked him, scurrying onto his lap and hiding in the circle of his legs. When he opened his eyes, they nearly popped out of his head. He stopped breathing and his heart gave a heavy thud. Not twenty feet in front of him, prowling along the edge of the encroaching forest, was a creature that was at once both sinuously beautiful and completely terrifying. And right at that moment, it locked eyes with Seth. He found he was paralyzed, unable to move and unable to look away. He was utterly mesmerized by the golden eyes of a cougar.

Chapter Three

Mate! For the first time in nearly five years, Troy's human and cougar were on the same exact page. *Mine! Take!* The stretch and burn of his cat muscles made him feel alive as he barreled through the thick forest, following the unique scent of his mate. When the wind first carried the enticing aroma to him, it hit him like a drug injected into the vein of an addict, immediately bringing the stormy sea of his mind to a calm and gentle peace. The feelings of loss and sadness and thoughts of ending his life disappeared. Like the captain of a lost ship who spots the salvation of a glowing beacon from a lighthouse, he no longer felt adrift in the dark.

Troy's entire existence was focused on reaching his mate. He wanted to bite. He wanted to claim! Branches tore at his fur, his lungs burned. It wasn't until the clearing became visible that Troy realized where his nose was leading him. Despite wanting—*needing* to get to his mate, Troy ground to a halt, concealed just inside the woods that surrounded the small cottage.

He prowled back and forth, images of the past flitting through his mind: playing in the yard behind the cottage with his brothers while his mother and Cecelia sat laughing and drinking sun tea, his father, broken and mateless, raging through Cecelia's beloved gardens, the overgrown gnarled mess that had overtaken the cottage years later, leaving it feeling tainted, haunted.

Troy bared his teeth, sinking his claws into the earth, as the memories of that dreadful day and the misery that followed assaulted him over and over. His beast's instincts began to take over again. He wanted to destroy something! A snarl built in his chest, and he could feel his humanity slipping away again. Movement in the clearing drew his attention, his sharp vision focusing on an absolutely gorgeous redhead running around the now pristine yard.

The cougar inhaled deeply, the unique scent of the man stinging his nostrils. The darkness that had invaded his thoughts faded. The man was his mate, the one human being on this planet that both belonged to him and owned him at the same time. Slowly, silently he prowled closer.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he noticed how gorgeous the cottage was now. Troy shouldn't be surprised that the place eventually sold. The man had obviously been here for a while, if the meticulous gardens and fresh paint were any indication. It must have taken him years to fix the place up, but Troy

didn't care. The man was his and he would claim him and drag him back to his home. The thought of his mate occupying the same space where that Leshy bitch once lived burrowed under his skin and made him itch.

Mine! He moved closer to the clearing, intent on taking what was his. His fangs ached with the need to sink into his mate. Troy's beast wanted the man's blood on his tongue, wanted to taste, to take. His vision narrowed on the man's athletic body as he stalked forward between the trees. His mate was built perfectly, muscular but not bulky, tall and strong. His skin looked like white marble and his hair; it was a coppery red, like the color of autumn.

Claim him! Troy's paw landed on the ground just past the last row of trees. He moved silently, low to the ground. He tensed, ready to pounce. His lip curled back over his large, sharp teeth. *Mine!* His instincts screamed but just as he moved to burst into the clearing, his mate began jumping around. The sudden movement stunned Troy's beast and caused him to pause.

Was the man dancing? In the middle of the yard? *Okay. So my mate is a fool. Sexy as hell, but still a fool.* Troy stepped back into the forest once again as he watched the person fated to be his thrash and gyrate around in his bare feet. It was endearing and unpredictable, and it made Troy smile, even though he was in cougar form. That's when he realized how in control his human side was right then. He used the moment of clarity to think.

He could not approach his mate as a cougar. The man was not a shifter and Troy would frighten him. Shifting in front of him was definitely out, and walking out of the woods naked would likely—definitely—freak his guy out. Lost in thought, his human side didn't notice the two streaks of fur that raced towards his mate. His cougar, however, definitely did. He leapt forward, ready to race to his man's rescue, but quickly came to a stop when the sound of the redhead's laughter reached his ears.

Troy watched curiously as his mate scooped up one of the animals, a ferret he realized, and took something from its mouth before setting it back down and taking off running across the yard. Troy found himself completely intrigued by the man in front of him. Something in his chest shifted as he watched his carefree mate play with his pets.

He sat, like a housecat, and watched the man drive around a remote control monster truck, all the while making loud sound effects of tires screeching and an engine revving. Troy chuffed, the closest his cougar got to a human laugh, when his mate drove the toy, with the ferrets on top of it, towards himself and

then jumped out of the way yelling, "Watch out for innocent bystanders, you mad man!" while shaking his fist in the air.

No, Troy would not be claiming his mate today. He breathed deep, swallowing down the scent of his mate and using it to calm his beast, so he could convince both the human and the cougar that it was the right decision. The man was here. He was real. And Troy would use that knowledge to hang on a little longer, long enough to show the beautiful redhead what it meant to mate with a shifter and to convince him to give himself willingly.

Accepting his decision, Troy slunk between the trees and brush, continuing to watch his mate. His mind was clear and his beast was subdued, but that didn't mean his instincts were gone. He needed to watch over his mate and protect him, wanted to be near him. He would stay until the man went inside for the night, he rationalized with himself. While his beautiful ginger was safely locked up in his house, Troy would return home and figure out a way to introduce himself to the man as a human as soon as possible. The possibility of going feral still loomed without the mating bond complete. Troy needed to move things along quickly.

The sky grew dim and the sun began to dip down below the horizon. *Hmmm. Maybe this would go a lot quicker as a cougar.* It was clear that Troy's mate was an animal lover. He actually felt a little jealous of the affection the man showed his ferrets as he watched them curl into his lap while he sat soaking up the last of the sun's rays.

Troy settled on his belly in a patch of leaves and took in his mate. The man's skin and hair seemed to glow in the sun's fading rays. He wanted to run his tongue along the smooth, creamy muscles of the man's arms. He wondered if his mate would like the rough sandpaper of his cougar's tongue or prefer the soft velvet of his human one. Would he have the same fiery hair on his chest or was he smooth there as well? Did he like to cook? Enjoy the same horrible British sitcoms Troy did? What color were his eyes?

Before Troy even realized what he was doing, he found himself standing out in the open, just feet from his mate. So close to the man that his need to claim and mark him came surging forward, his animal instincts once again fighting to take control. He stood, his muscles rigid, as his human and cougar sides warred with one another. When his mate suddenly turned a startled gaze towards him, he froze, locked into place by the intensity of the man's dark green eyes.

Troy was losing. He was going to leap across the space that separated him from his mate and seal his fate by destroying any chance he had to build a

lasting relationship with the man. Another shifter would understand, but his mate wasn't a shifter! Troy was going to bite him, shift and fuck him. He was going to terrify him and quite possibly break him. Troy's paw lifted.

"Hello, putty tat." The calm voice brought Troy to a standstill, a shiver rolling down his spine. Hearing his mate speak directly to him for the first time was almost orgasmic. And then his words registered and Troy found himself cocking his head to the side. Did the guy just break out a Tweety Bird? His cougar raged a little at the insult. He was a fierce predator! He would teach his mate to respect his beast, show him he was to be feared.

Troy took a step forward. His mate tensed and scooped up his two rodents, holding them against his chest. This time when he spoke he used a country bumpkin accent. "A cougar killed my pa. Now see here, there's no way I'm a lettin' one get my babies, too. Ya hear? Now skit. Go on. Git outta here."

Troy's desire to laugh overrode his mating frenzy. That ridiculous southern accent and the man's absolutely ballsy behavior had Troy feeling lighter than air. His mate was interesting and funny. Troy imagined spending his lifetime with the sexy redhead and his quirky personality. But first, he had to win the man over, not give him a fucking heart attack, so he turned and bolted into the woods. He remained hidden until his mate went inside and then, reluctantly, made his way back home.

He shifted on his back porch and entered the kitchen off his deck wearing nothing but a smile on his face. He was smitten. His mate!! After all this time. And the man was hot as hell, loved animals and the outdoors, was cute and fun and *hot*! Troy's cock grew hard with the mere thought of his sexy mate and the man's amazing scent. He had to relieve himself right there on the kitchen floor, twice, before he could even attempt to think of what he should do next.

Sleeping was out of the question. He vibrated with nervous energy, and his thoughts rolled around his brain like marbles in a tin can. What should he say? What should he wear? Should he bring a gift? Troy went from room to room just wandering around and thinking about how differently his day had ended from what he had planned. His beast was still restless and threatening his control, but it was manageable now, with the knowledge of his impending mating.

Troy found some protein bars in the cupboard and ate them. He hadn't planned on needing any groceries and would have to find time to get to the store. He needed to provide for his mate. In fact, making a list of things to do

would help center him, so he got out a pad and pencil and started writing them down. Cancelling that damn email was the first thing he thought of. There would be no need to donate his estate. Everything he owned now belonged to his mate first.

Several hours later, Troy had a long list that included everything from fixing the loose basement step so his mate wouldn't fall to buying sunscreen to protect the man's fair skin. Dawn was less than an hour away now, so Troy showered and jerked off one more time in an attempt to relax enough to appear normal when he first introduced himself.

He dressed in his best pair of jeans, a tight black T-shirt and hiking boots. It was still a bit early but he figured he'd just take his time walking over there. The cool morning air calmed his heated skin, and the sounds of the woods around him soothed his nerves. Although it was still dark outside, Troy's cougar eyes allowed him to see just fine. The outline of the cottage loomed ahead. Troy still wasn't comfortable with the fact that the man bought, and was living in, the house of a Leshy, but his rational side knew it was just a building and nothing there could harm his mate.

Troy leapt up from the stump he'd just settled on. He had planned to wait for the sun to rise before he knocked on the door, but a light had flickered to life and that was all the reason he needed to approach the cottage. His mate was probably getting ready to go to work. Troy wondered what the guy did for a living and if it would keep him away from home for long hours each day.

Stomach in knots, he knocked on the door. When he didn't get a response, he simply knocked louder. Now that he was here, his instincts were clamoring for him to barge in and exercise his right to take and claim. He couldn't walk away. Troy knocked even harder. His skin felt tight with need. Thank God, the door finally cracked open, and the heavy up-close scent of his mate soothed his beast.

At least until his mate uttered the word "Fire". Troy began to panic, the overwhelming need to protect his mate screaming for him to grab the man and run. The man's next words almost didn't register. "As in, there better be one or else I'm going to be pissed."

"Oh, um," Troy stammered. This was so not going as smoothly as he planned. "No, no fire. Sorry." He stuck out his hand, dying for some skin-to-skin contact. "I'm Troy. Your neighbor. I just wanted to introduce myself."

The man's copper eyebrows rose and his lickable mouth fell open. He crossed his arms, refusing to accept Troy's offered hand. "At five o'clock in the morning?"

"I know it's early but..."

"Three years after I moved in?" His mate's voice was strained and that put his beast on edge, feeling the need to calm him.

"Your light was on." Troy pointed towards the spotlight that hung on the corner of the house like its existence would make him seem less crazy.

The door pulled open further and his mate stuck his head out, looking at the light like it offended him. "That's a motion light," he said slowly, enunciating each word and making Troy feel a little stupid. Not enough to walk away, of course, because who could blame him for wanting to be near this man.

When the door slowly began to creep closed, Troy scrambled for something to say. "Cougar," was all that came out. He swallowed, and a bead of sweat formed at the back of his neck. "Um. There's a cougar that's been wandering around this area. Just thought I should warn you, you know, do my neighborly duty and all."

The man's face hardened and Troy's beast responded in kind. Was he afraid? Had Troy truly scared him the night before? "It's a forest." His mate's voice matched the look on his face. "Of course there are mountain lions wandering around. I'm sure he means no harm, so just leave him alone."

What was this? His mate was defending his cougar? Troy's shock must have shown on his face because the amazing man standing in front of him raised his chin just a little. He must have mistaken Troy's pride at being defended by his mate for something else, because his stance said "So what are you gonna do about it".

"You may be right... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name." Troy needed something from his mate in that moment. A name, a touch, anything.

"It's Seth." His shoulders relaxed and that made Troy's tension ease as well.

"Nice to meet you." Troy held out his hand once again. It hung there in the air for what seemed like an eternity. Troy could feel his thoughts shattering again. The animal side of him wanted to force himself on Seth, wanted to touch him all over, wanted to bite him. But the human in Troy held on and was rewarded when calloused fingers slid against his palm and wrapped around his

hand. Troy took in every sensation, from the warmth that spread up his arm to the tickle of the fine hair on the back of Seth's hand against his thumb. He closed his eyes for a brief moment to lock it all inside. It would be enough to get him through a little while longer.

Seth cleared his throat. "You too. Only, it would be much nicer, say, around eight a.m." The smile that accompanied his words took away the sting and made Troy's dick twitch. His mate was so gorgeous when he smiled. He wanted to scrape his nails across the red stubble along Seth's jaw and dip his tongue in the dimple on his left cheek. Of course, if he didn't figure out a way to spend some more time with the man, he wouldn't get a chance to do any of that.

"Sorry about that." Troy stuffed his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching out to pull Seth against him. "I just moved back to the area and the time change is messing with me so I was up and walking about. Besides, I was thinking about doing some outside work around the place, and it's best to do that early, before the sun makes it too hot."

Troy did his best to make his next sentence come out normal. The idea had just popped into his head, and he felt nauseous not knowing if Seth would take the bait. "Looks like you did a lot of work around this place. Last time I saw it, it was a disaster. I wish I could afford to pay someone to landscape my place too."

Seth yawned and stretched his arms above his head, revealing a strip of milky skin and a faint trail of copper hairs. Troy almost didn't catch him say, "Yeah, I didn't hire anyone. Did it myself. I could maybe come by and give you some advice sometime." Yes! Troy did a fist pump in his head. "Some normal time, you know, when all the nocturnal animals have gone to bed and it's us normal beings turn to be out."

"Sure. Yeah. Sorry again."

"No problem. Nice to meet you, Troy."

The shiver that tore through Troy's body at the sound of his name on his mate's lips threatened to shake him apart. It was another precious gem he would hold tight in the days to come, because he knew he had to walk away now or risk coming off as a pushy weirdo. "You too, Seth. I'll be around all week if you get the chance to stop over. I'm the last driveway on the left, before you reach Route 329. Big log cabin about a few miles back."

“Okay. Maybe I will. See ya.” Seth closed the door but not before Troy got another glimpse of his flat stomach as he lightly scratched his abs.

Troy took a deep breath and turned to leave. During the walk back to his house, he ran every second he'd spent with his mate through his mind. He could feel the tug of his instincts urging him to turn around, but he held strong, reminding both halves of himself what all they'd gained. *Seth*. They knew his name now, knew he liked to work with his roughened hands, had an adorable dimple and that yes, he had red hair all over.

Four days later Troy was still running through all of this over and over, like some kind of bizarre chant. He didn't know how much longer he could keep from breaking apart. He'd really wanted Seth to come to him of his own free will, but the fact was, he was going to have to find a reason to go back to that cottage.

Well, go back to the door really, because he'd been there every day since that morning, keeping an eye on his mate from a distance and needing the visual awareness to keep his beast at bay. He'd learned a lot more about Seth as well, paid attention to every detail that could help him win the man over. He figured out the man had to be some kind of artist. He often came out to play with those little rats, with stains on his hands and a slight turpentine scent overlying his natural one. And he didn't leave the house for a regular nine-to-five kind of job.

Seth also loved to make fresh mint tea from leaves in his garden, to sing off-pitch with his windows open and to take naps on a hammock with the ferrets he seemed to love having around more than humans curled up on his chest. Troy often found himself wanting to shift and make a meal of the little beasts, especially when he watched, full of envy and jealousy, as Seth stroked them and spoke softly to them.

Probably not the best way to win him over, Troy thought as he hammered the nails into the wooden step he was replacing. Maybe I can take over some kind of weed and ask him if he knows how to get rid of it. Troy looked at the hammer in his hand. Or maybe I should smash my thumb and go ask him to help me wrap it. He raised the heavy tool high, but just as he was prepared to bring it down hard, a car door slammed behind him.

“Hey, Rooster, you're going to split the wood hitting it that hard.” Seth's voice held a hint of laughter. How had Troy missed his approach? He must

have been closer to losing it than he thought, but now that his mate was here, at his home, the world around him settled and he felt at peace.

“Rooster?” Troy stood and turned so he could take in the view of his man walking towards him, sun behind him so that he looked like he was glowing. The sight made him ache with the need to touch him. He gripped the hammer tight and stood his ground. The man was here and that was a step in the right direction.

“Yeah, you know,” Seth smirked and shrugged his shoulder, “up before the ass crack of dawn and has to wake everyone within five miles up as well.”

Laughter echoed off the trees. Troy hadn't even tried to hold it in. The urge to hug his mate close hit him again, but this time it was different, born from a place of light and warmth, and not from the dark feral side of his nature. “True enough.” Troy clapped Seth on the shoulder when he stopped mere feet in front of him.

“So,” Seth started, “I was headed to town for some groceries and saw your drive, and figured I'd drop by and check you out—I mean check out your bed—your flower beds, I mean.” Seth let the air out of his lungs and looked away in embarrassment. The color that flooded his cheeks was brighter than any spring flower and made Troy want to lay his hands against it to feel the heat.

Troy moved to the side a little, bringing himself into Seth's peripheral vision when he spoke. “Well, my *beds* may not be as gorgeous as yours, but I hope you find something you like and can work with. I'd love to get your hands on them.”

“Definitely.” Seth turned back towards him and let his eyes roam the length of Troy's body, making it clear they were talking about more than landscaping, before walking off towards the gardens that lay in front of his porch.

Weeks later, Troy realized that day had been the beginning of the mating dance, the flirtation and feeling each other out, the building of tension. The day had been one of the best in Troy's entire life. They walked around his entire property, making small talk about the mountains, living so far from everything and what kind of plants and materials worked best for the climate. Troy had even managed to get himself invited along to town by mentioning some stuff he needed.

Riding in Seth's Jeep had been an exercise in restraint. Troy had to hide his erection as he watched his mate's muscular legs work the pedals and his veiny

forearm flex when changing gears. He had jerked off with those visions dancing in his head at least a dozen times in the past three weeks, trying to keep the sharp sexual edge of his nature squelched.

The fact that he and Seth would be spending the entire night together tomorrow didn't help matters. They'd spent more and more time together in the days since Seth stopped by. They worked side by side in Troy's yard, texted and even ate together a few times. Troy did everything he could to "accidentally" bump into Seth, or find a reason to text him or drop by his cottage. But what made his heart skip a beat was thinking about all the ways Seth did the same thing.

He knew the hiking trip they planned for the weekend would take their budding friendship to the next level. What began as light flirtation had built to a nearly palpable tension between them. Troy noticed the increased frequency of touches, heated glances and sly readjustments in the last few days. His cougar was all but clawing its way out, wanting to make the next move. He planned to take a long run today in hopes that it would help him maintain control tomorrow.

Troy checked his bags again. He needed to be sure he had everything his mate could want or need. When he was certain he hadn't forgotten anything, he shifted and took off. He ran the trail that Seth had mentioned, checking for any problems or dangers. Doing stuff like that, things that fulfilled the beast's need to protect and provide for his mate, helped soothe the relentless drive of his instincts, enough so that he slept well that night, content with his efforts and wanting to be well-rested for the day ahead.

Seth picked him up just after dawn. Troy agreed to let him drive. He really did love watching him move, legs spread a little, the material of his shorts pulled taut across his thighs. He had to turn away and look out the window, leaning his head against the glass to cool down a little.

"What's the matter, Rooster?" Seth had taken to using the nickname for him often. "You nervous? The trail's not that hard. Promise." Seth's smirk was sexy as hell.

"Only thing I'm nervous about, fire crotch, is whether or not you'll be able to keep up."

Seth drove off the side of the road a little, throwing Troy against the door. He laughed when Seth gave him a dirty look and lightly punched him in the

shoulder. He couldn't resist antagonizing him some more. "I see you have a redhead's temper too. Hope you brought a hat 'cause I hear bright colors really attract bees."

"Very funny, dickwadle." Seth chuckled and the sound went straight to Troy's gut, churning up all sorts of feelings there. Between his animal instincts and his human heart, he was beginning to feel like he would break in half under the strength of his emotions. His mate was amazing, so funny and smart and playful. It hurt so bad to be away from him, but it was beginning to be painful to be around him, too; his want and need a sharp stabbing pulse under his skin. Troy wasn't sure how much longer he could keep his beast at bay.

"What's with the frowny face, Rooster?" Seth made his own mocking frowny face. "I was just teasing. Lighten up, sweetcheeks."

"I know that." Troy pushed away the dark thoughts that had once again churned to life inside him. He found it nearly impossible to not be happy when his mate was near. "I'm just confused as to what a dickwadle is."

"You know how penguins kind of waddle on their little orange feet when they walk?" Troy nodded and Seth continued. "Well, picture that but instead of a penguin imagine it's a dick waddling around on a set of big, hairy balls. That's you, hairy-balled dickwadle, when you poke fun at my ginger-tasticness."

Troy held his hands up in surrender. "Okay, I get it. No carrot top. No agent orange. Promise."

"Good." Seth turned his focus back on the road, and they drove in comfortable silence for a minute or two.

"Besides," Troy broke the silence, "I didn't mean it as an insult. After all, ginger is one of my favorite things to eat." This time when the Jeep swerved off the road, Troy was ready for it.

Chapter Four

Seth pulled off the main road and followed the all-terrain path to a clearing near one of the park ranger stations. He parked, shutting off the engine and turning to look at Troy, who was still wearing the shit-eating grin that took over his face when the man made him run off the road.

Damn, he's gorgeous. Troy had the bronzed, sun-kissed skin that Seth loved on a man. It made him think of days spent outdoors, physical labor and the beach. Troy's thick, rich brown hair and dark eyes definitely revved his little peter piper as well. A fact he would do well not to think about right at that moment, or else he'd embarrass himself when he stepped out of the car.

"So," Seth said, "the trail is just north of here. Looks like the weather is going to be perfect. This will be so much better than band camp!" He threw the driver's door open and bounced out, unable to contain his enthusiasm. Troy chuckled as he came around the other side of the Jeep and joined him. They stretched out the kinks from the two hour drive. Seth wanted to hump Troy's leg like Lassie when the man arched his back, exposing the perfect V leading down into the waistband of his shorts.

Troy caught him looking, the bastard, but he just shrugged it off and opened the Jeep's hatch to grab their gear. Seth's favorite backpack and tightly rolled sleeping bag took up very little space, and thank heavens, because Troy's was fucking huge. "Jesus, Rooster," Seth poked at the overstuffed bag, "did you pack a Sherpa in here? We're only going for a day, man."

Poking him in the ribs, Troy shot back, "Yeah, but you're kind of a goofball so I had to pack for every contingency. I've got a first aid kit with plenty of calamine lotion, too."

Seth swung his pack onto his shoulders. "Come on, man, I swear I never got poison ivy before! I never use gloves when I garden. I like to *feel* stuff and get my hands dirty. How was I supposed to know you have some kind of superior strain of poison growing in your mutated yard."

"Well, I think you learned your lesson." Troy easily slung his giant bag over his broad shoulders, proving all those glorious muscles weren't just for show. "I've never seen hands look like that! You looked like some hideous, blistering lagoon monster from a really bad B-grade movie."

Seth put his arms out in front of him Frankenstein style and made some cheesy monster sounds, distracting Troy with the show so he could get him into a headlock. He rubbed his heel against Troy's head. "Say mercy!"

"Never, Godzilla!" Troy squealed. He shoved at Seth's chest, trying to get him off and in the squabble somehow ended up scraping his thumb nail over one of his nipples. Seth moaned a little, and they both froze before he released his grip on Troy's head and turned to close the hatch door.

"I, um..." Seth had to clear his throat before he could finish. "I just need to stash my keys, and then we can get going." He walked towards a nearby tree and started climbing it.

"What the hell are you doing?" Troy bellowed.

Seth was surprised by the angry tone of Troy's voice. "I always hide my keys like this." He straddled the first thick branch he came to and tied the keys around the limb. "That way if we get attacked by wood sprites or angry grizzlies and lose all our stuff, we can still drive back home."

"And what happens when you fall and break your neck and can't drive anyways?" Troy called up from where he stood right underneath Seth, looking like he was prepared to catch him if he fell.

Seth had noticed how much of a worrywart Troy was. He kind of liked knowing the guy worried about him, but this was getting a little ridiculous so he decided to make a point. He stood up on the limb, which was only about ten feet from the ground, and did a backflip off of it, landing behind Troy. His knees jarred a little, but it was totally worth it. The look on Troy's face when he spun around was priceless.

"Jesus H. Are you insane?" Troy surprised Seth by grabbing him and hugging him tight. "Don't ever do that again."

Not the reaction Seth had expected. He didn't know whether to be pissed at Troy for getting all overprotective-mama-bear on him or to feel a little cherished. "I'm fine." Seth extricated himself from Troy's strong arms. "My parents put me through years of gymnastics when I refused to stop climbing and swinging off everything. They figured if they couldn't stop me they at least wanted me to learn how to land."

Troy released the breath he seemed to be holding and some of the tension bled from his body. He started walking in the direction of the trail. Seth barely heard him mumble, "They should have just tied you down."

Jogging to catch up to his surly neighbor, Seth shoulder bumped him. “Where would the fun be in that?”

“Life can’t be all about fun.” Troy scooped a twig up off the ground and snapped it in half. “There’s nothing fun about broken bones or bloody gashes. Goofing around gets people killed.”

Seth took a moment to process that before he spoke. “You sound like you’re talking from experience.” Troy’s shrug didn’t really confirm or deny, and Seth didn’t like the dark turn the conversation had taken. “Well, I’m sorry if that’s been your experience, but I think if a person has a chance to feel alive, to take in the energy around them and, for even a moment, be happy and carefree then I doubt they regret the consequences.”

They walked across the clearing and into the woods in silence. Troy looked to be deep in thought, so Seth let him go for the moment. He was trying to think of a way to salvage things when Troy finally spoke. “Thank you. I never really thought of it that way. It’s kind of nice knowing that maybe she lived her life to its fullest and died having been happy.” Seth desperately wanted to ask Troy more, but he got the message that the man didn’t want to discuss it any further when he took off running, calling over his shoulder, “Last one to the trailhead is a rotten egg.”

For about an hour, they kept up a quick and steady pace. They talked almost nonstop about everything and anything, from their favorite Monty Python quotes to the best kind of tackle to use for catching trout, but they could have done that sitting in the kitchen back home. They were in the middle of one of the most beautiful forests in America on a perfect sunny day. Seth wanted to explore, to look and touch and marvel at the world around them, and he wanted to share it all with the sometimes broody dark-haired man beside him.

He veered off the path towards a moss-covered log that caught his eye. It took Troy a few seconds to realize Seth wasn’t next to him any longer, but as soon as he did, he backtracked and came up next to him. “Is something wrong?” Troy asked right away. Seth wasn’t sure why the guy always seemed to think the worst, but he would bet it had something to do with what he mentioned earlier.

Seth had the strongest urge to reach out and caress Troy’s cheek, soothe his worries and reassure him that he was fine. He settled for telling him, “No, nothing at all. This just caught my eye and I wanted to get a closer look. I’ve never been able to replicate the feel of moss in my paintings.” Seth ran his hand

across the soft, spongy surface and smiled when Troy reached out to do the same thing. "I can get all the colors right. I just don't know how to make it *feel* right, you know."

"I don't know." Troy's fingers brushed against Seth's as he spoke. "The little I've seen of your work is pretty amazing. I bet you're just being too hard on yourself."

"Thanks." Seth smiled. The words hit him right in the chest, but the touch, it went straight to his balls. He'd never wanted anyone so much as he did Troy. It was starting to scare him a little, especially since he could feel the kind of primal connection with him that he'd always believed he could feel with nature. Damn his hippie parents for turning him into a free-spirited freak. Reaching into his bag, he grabbed his camera and took a few steps back in order to capture the best angle.

"I should have known you would bring that thing," Troy chuckled.

"Of course, it's what I do." A frown creased Seth's face. "Does it bother you?"

"Not at all." Troy was quick to ease his concerns. "I think it's cute."

"Cute?" Seth said incredulously, and then thought better of it. "Well, I guess that's not the worst thing a guy's ever said about me."

"What do you mean?" Troy asked as he turned to sit on the fallen tree trunk. When he looked up at Seth, face open and earnest, Seth raised his camera and snapped a picture.

"Well," Seth lowered the camera and looked right into Troy's eyes, "most people—most guys, at first they like how into nature and the outdoors I am. They put it together with my size and the cottage in the woods, and they think I'm some kind of burly, lumberjack type. But then they spend some more time with me and they realize I'm more the bleeding-heart, tree-hugger type, and they get turned off pretty quickly. Even then, if they still hang around, the way I see the world eventually leads them to running away while calling me weirdo or freak." Seth looked away, taking pictures of the moss now and trying to hide how nervous he was waiting for Troy's response.

Troy's chest took over the viewfinder of Seth's camera as the man stepped in front of him and pushed his arm down, forcing Seth to lower the camera and face him. "I don't think there's anything wrong with the way you are, Seth. I'm just as connected to the earth as you are, even if I take it for granted

sometimes.” Troy lifted his hand and rested it on the back of Seth’s neck, applying just a little bit of pressure and pulling Seth’s head forward.

Seth thought maybe Troy was going to kiss him, and he wet his lips in anticipation. He was disappointed when Troy simply placed a chaste peck on his forehead and then took a step back. “So,” Troy’s voice was a little raspy, letting Seth know he wasn’t completely unaffected, “what do you say we take our time the rest of the way to the peak, and you can show me some more of the sights I’ve been missing.”

Seth never enjoyed a hike more than he did the next few hours. The sky was a clear blue, the sun warmed his skin, and the air between he and Troy stayed light and carefree. Seth took tons of pictures, sneaking in a few of Troy’s natural beauty as well.

At first Seth pointed out all sorts of things that Troy may have just walked on by, but after a while, Troy started making his own finds. It kind of became a game between them to see who could find the most interesting thing. Troy spotted a butterfly with speckled lime-green wings, and Seth brought their attention to a pair of bald eagles and their nest.

They laughed and joked and shoved each other around a little. They ate their lunch sitting on a huge moss-covered boulder, the whole time playing the cloud game. At one point Seth swore he saw a puffy white cloud shaped like a platypus, but Troy argued it was a seal balancing a ball on its nose. Agreeing to disagree, they packed up and moved on.

About three-quarters of the way up the mountain, they came across a small creek. Seth moved along the rocky edges searching amongst the stones and other debris. “What are you looking for?” Troy inquired before dipping his hands in the cool water and wiping them over his face.

“You know what petrified wood looks like?” Seth asked him.

“Yeah, of course. Never found any myself, but I’ve seen some in the museum.”

“Well, you know how it formed when lava flowed into water and everything?” Seth felt silly admitting the next part and could feel his cheeks heating. “So anytime I come across a creek or stream, I like to see if I can find any. It’s, um, really beautiful.”

“That’s cool.” Troy joined him in his search, only to give up a few minutes later. “You know, I’m pretty sure they sell it in different places.”

Seth chucked a rock at him, making sure it didn't come too close to hitting him. "Of course they do! It's the memory that counts. I want to be able to look at it and say 'I remember when I found that'."

"I can see that," Troy said after thinking about it. Seth knew that Troy really did understand when he doubled his efforts to find some. Even with two of them looking as far along the creek shore as they could without getting too far off track, they didn't find a single piece of the million-year-old marbled wood.

Once they were back on the trail, Seth decided he would just have to find another way to remember this particular trip, not that he would be forgetting this day anytime soon. "Hey, Troy," Seth called from where he lagged behind.

"What's up?" Troy jogged the few feet back to him.

"Go sit on that tree," he told Troy, pointing at a huge tree a few feet off the path. The trunk of the tree split about four feet off the ground, and it continued growing in two different directions, making a perfect seat.

"Okay. But only because I like it when you're bossy." Troy winked at him before taking off his backpack and heading through the brush to the tree. Placing his hands on the space where the wood split, he pushed himself up with his arms and sort of hopped, turning his body so that delectable ass of his landed right on the flat seat. Troy's bent legs were just a bit too short for his feet to touch the ground and for some reason Seth found that adorable.

"Now what?" Troy threw his arms up in the air.

Seth didn't bother responding verbally, he just raised his camera and started snapping photos.

"Why did I even bother asking?" Troy sighed before waving Seth over. "Come here."

It never even occurred to Seth to question it; he lowered his camera and went to Troy, who pulled him into the space between his dangling legs. "You've been taking photos of me all day," Troy said, "but you haven't been in a single one."

Seth made a strangled noise in his throat, but it didn't stop Troy from turning Seth around and pulling him back against his rock solid chest. When Seth relaxed back against him, Troy slid his arms around Seth's waist and pulled them even closer together, his palms flat on Seth's stomach, causing him to fumble his camera and nearly drop it.

When Seth got control of himself and had the camera turned around towards them, Troy put his head on Seth's shoulder and said, "Say cheese sticks!"

Seth was so distracted by Troy's body heat and finally getting the man's hands on him that he was barely able to snap the photo. "Better take a few," he mumbled, "in case I cut off our heads or we have crazy eyes or something." Troy laughed and Seth felt himself smile. He kept his finger pressed down the entire time, instinctually knowing that these photos would be some of the best he'd ever taken.

About fifteen minutes later, neither of them were smiling or laughing anymore. They'd come to the point in the trail that veered right, taking them around a rocky incline the rest of the way to the top. Seth planned to climb the steep slope, which Troy quickly informed him he would not allow.

"Excuse me?" Seth's voice was low and the words came out slowly.

"It's too dangerous." Troy began pacing back and forth, hands clenched into fists, stretching his neck and rolling his shoulders. It looked to Seth like he was trying to get control of himself. Maybe he was afraid of heights or simply didn't think he could do it, but it was a small climb and Troy was in great shape. Seth had no doubts about either of their abilities to make it to the top, but he didn't want to make Troy do something the guy clearly didn't want to.

"Fine," Seth capitulated. "I'll climb up from here and you can take the trail. I really enjoy it but, if you're not comfortable, I understand. We'll meet at the top." That seemed like a reasonable compromise to Seth. It would only take him about a half an hour to climb and a little bit longer for Troy to walk.

"You think I—" Troy stopped pacing and looked at Seth. "I'm not—It's barely thirty feet up! I'm not scared to climb."

"Okay." Seth smiled wickedly, not believing for one second that Troy was being honest. The man had look petrified when Seth said he planned to climb. "Let's get going then."

"No," Troy's voice was firm. "I don't care if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you the rest of the way up. You are not taking such an unnecessary risk."

Seth was dumbfounded. "Are you—is it *me* you're worried about?"

"Absolutely." Troy stepped up to Seth and cupped his face in his hands. "Look, I can't explain it but I have a very deep need to protect you. I've seen

what can happen when you do the fun things instead of the safe ones.” Troy swallowed and looked away. “My mother used to come home bruised and battered every time she went on another one of her thrill-seeking adventures.” He turned to face Seth again, staring right into his eyes. “Until one day, she didn’t come home at all.”

All Seth could do was look into the dark depths of Troy’s eyes. He couldn’t find the words to express how much seeing Troy’s pain made him hurt as well. But he also knew he would never be happy in a bubble. “I’m so sorry that happened, Troy. So sorry.” Seth pulled Troy to him and squeezed him hard before letting him go. “But please don’t use it to cage me or yourself.” And with that Seth was done with the dark and serious that had settled over them. “Besides, I’m bigger than you. I doubt you can carry me all the way, and can you imagine how ridiculous that would look?”

Seth watched as Troy seemed to war with himself. He knew that dark, primal nature he’d seen in Troy wanted to control him. He just hoped to God that part of him didn’t win. When Troy looked in Seth’s eyes and told him, “I’m serious. I’ll do it,” his heart nearly broke from disappointment until he saw the smirk on Troy’s face.

“You can try.” Seth winked.

They ended up rolling around in the leaves, wrestling each other for dominance. It was all very playful, but Seth couldn’t help but feel a little sexual undertone to it all. He did his best to keep his rapidly hardening cock from touching Troy. Eventually Troy ended up on top of Seth, between his legs. The air suddenly shifted from cool to steaming. They both stopped laughing and just looked at one another as Troy lowered his hips against Seth’s. Their moans seemed to echo off the mountain.

Not one to give up, Seth took advantage of the distraction and flipped Troy onto his back. He ground their dicks together a little bit. “Tell you what, how about we compromise. We climb. Together. But I know I saw some rope and stuff in your bag so we can take it slow and wear harnesses.”

Troy’s thoughts played out across his face so that Seth knew the exact moment Troy gave in. “Deal. But don’t think you’ll always be able to win.” Troy grabbed Seth’s ass and slammed their hips together hard and ground their bodies against each other.

Seth gave as good as he got. “Wouldn’t dream of it, Rooster.” He tweaked Troy’s nipple before clambering to his feet, not wanting things to go too far just

yet. Seth held his hand out and helped Troy to his feet, where they proceeded to selflessly brush the leaves off each other's asses before gearing up and attacking the climb.

Almost an hour later, Seth grabbed Troy's outstretched hand and helped haul him the rest of the way to the top. They lay on their backs in the cool grass, both panting a little and smiling a lot. Seth's eyes kept wandering over the glistening muscles of Troy's arms, so thankful the man wore a tank top. He had the richest golden skin, and Seth wanted to lick the sweat from it. Too bad the climb had taken nearly twice as long as he'd expected and they needed to get moving in order to set up their tent before the sun went down.

Seth slapped Troy's stomach with the back of his hand. "Well, I know one thing for sure. I definitely will not be calling you Billy in the future. You climb more like a fish than a goat." He jumped to his feet before Troy could retaliate.

"Aw, come on, man, that's not fair," Troy whined. "You would have slipped a few times too if you'd been the one looking up at that tight ass of yours the whole time."

Seth tripped over his own feet and turned to glare at Troy, who laughed at his stumble. They found a nice, flat spot for their tent and worked together seamlessly to get it all set up, the whole time talking about their first times sleeping out under the stars as children. When they had everything finished with the tent, Seth worked on getting a fire going while Troy got out the food he'd packed for dinner.

Seth was surprised and touched when he saw the things Troy packed. He had Tupperware containers filled with all of Seth's favorite fresh veggies and soy dogs to cook on sticks over the fire. He brought all the fixings for s'mores and two jars of applesauce, one for each of them. He even brought some of Seth's favorite loose Golden Monkey tea and a strainer for it.

As the sun slowly set behind the trees they sat, legs dangling over the edge of the mountain, to enjoy their meal together. As soon as Seth settled, Troy turned to him and said, "Thank you."

"For what?" Seth asked around a bite of soy dog in his mouth.

"For today. For showing me things through your eyes, all the beautiful and amazing stuff I would have walked right by. For talking me into climbing and for that incredibly sexy view of your ass." Troy nudged Seth with his shoulder. "I like you, Seth. A lot. You balance me out perfectly."

Slowly swallowing the bite in his mouth so he didn't choke, Seth turned to look at Troy, who was looking ahead, out over the forest. "I really like you, too," Seth admitted. "You know, for a brooding control freak, you're not totally unbearable." He bumped his shoulder against Troy's, letting him know he was merely teasing.

They ate the rest of their food in silence. It was strange how comfortable and right that felt. Seth was afraid he was falling really damn hard and fast. Lost in his thoughts, he didn't notice Troy pulling an object from his pocket until he felt it being placed in his hand. Seth looked down at the piece of petrified wood taking up his entire palm. The original brown of the wood was mottled with reds and oranges. It was beautiful.

Seth jerked his eyes up to Troy's but couldn't speak. Troy's face radiated warmth and something more when he spoke. "This moment right here, I wanted you to have something to remember it by." Seth curled his fingers around the gift in his hand and took Troy's hand in his other as they sat together and watched the last rays of the sun dip below the horizon. At least Seth knew he wasn't the only one falling.

Chapter Five

Troy reveled in being alone with his mate under the clear, starlit skies above the mountains of Washington. The day had gone better than he'd ever dreamed, despite a few rocky moments. The control he had right now over his beast was remarkable, and he had Seth to thank for it. The man was like a beacon in the dark, and once Troy opened up to allow him in, light shown on the whole world, chasing away the dark and scary.

Laying back on a blanket next to the fire, pointing out constellations and making up stories about where they came from, Troy knew he would be claiming his mate soon. They were perfect for each other and he knew Seth was feeling the same way. Troy told himself it would only be a little longer now, he could be patient.

“So,” Seth pointed at a bright white star just above the dark treetops and traced it with his finger to some other stars, “that one there is a pissed-off T. rex chasing its tail because he’s paranoid his tail is out to get him so he wants to get it first. And over there, that swoop of stars? That’s the little mermaid. I know because we both have luscious red hair and our tails bring all the boys to the yard.” Seth wiggled his hips. “Oh, and there’s a really rare winking star!” Seth gasped. “No, wait, that’s just an airplane.”

Troy laughed so hard his muscles cramped. “Please, no more,” he managed to get out between spasms. Finally getting control of himself, he was able to get some air into his lungs only to have his breath stolen when Seth suddenly leaned over him, braced on his outstretched arms. Troy reached up and grabbed him by the back of the neck, pulling him down.

Just as their lips were about to touch, Troy released his grip. Both the cougar and the man needed Seth to be the one to choose, needed him to be the one to close the gap. Seth didn't disappoint. His lips barely touched Troy's; they were a little dry from the day spent in the sun, but it didn't detract from the moment. The slight rough scrape actually ramped Troy up, appealing to his primal nature.

He lifted his head a bit, chasing contact, and flicked his tongue against the slight indent just under Troy's full bottom lip. Seth responded by sucking Troy's upper lip into his mouth and biting down on it, just enough to sting.

Kissing his mate was the greatest pleasure Troy had ever known. They lay there, surrounded by the glow of the crackling fire and the sounds of the forest, and kissed for what seemed like hours. At times it was hard and needy, but at others it was gentle and sweet as they learned each other's mouths with their own and the planes of one another's faces with their fingers.

Their movements eventually slowed and they moved into the tent. "Troy?" Seth's voice was a little raspy.

"Yeah?"

"Would it be okay if we zip our bags together? I'm kind of a cuddler."

Troy chuckled. If he could see Seth's face in the light, he would bet it was that bright rosy color he'd come to love. "Need me to be your teddy bear, huh? 'S okay I don't mind at all."

They crawled between the cool material of their bags, Seth laying with his head pillowed on Troy's chest as he drifted to sleep.

Troy lay awake a little while longer, letting the strands of Seth's silky hair slip through his fingers. The thrum of arousal still simmered through him from their intense make out session, but Troy was happy to let it burn. He would not be claiming his mate tonight, even if it was the only thing that would satisfy him. As he laid there, ensconced in the heat and scent of his mate, his beast came close to purring and Troy was perfectly content to wait until the time was right.

Things remained much the same in the light of the morning. A small part of Troy feared they would take a few steps back once the cover of dark was lifted, but he awoke to Seth running his nimble fingers over his chest and along every groove of his abs. They shared a few post-breakfast kisses and talked like the best of friends as they made their way down the mountain and back to Seth's Jeep.

The two-hour drive home seemed more like twenty minutes, and by the time Seth pulled off the main road onto Troy's drive, he was feeling a little sick in the stomach at being separated from his man. "Wow, we made great time." Troy tried to fill in the tense silence.

"Yeah." Seth cleared his throat. They pulled up in front of Troy's log cabin, and Seth got out to help him get his things. Troy shouldered his pack and just stood there as Seth closed the hatch and turned to give him a hug goodbye. Troy's heart sped up and he swore he could hear Seth's do the same. There was

an awkward moment when the hug had gone on too long so they reluctantly eased apart.

The growl that let loose from Troy's throat caught him by surprise. The beast's anger and possessiveness hit him like a ten-ton truck. It did not want to allow their mate to walk away.

"Oh, God," Seth gasped. "I'm so sorry! You should have said something if you were hungry. We could have stopped for a bite on the way back."

"Guess I didn't realize until we stopped." Seeing an opening, Troy took a chance with his next words. "I could run into town and grab us some Thai if, you know, you're hungry too. And if you're not sick of me yet."

Troy swore he saw Seth's shoulders relax right before he grabbed Troy and put him into a headlock. He scrubbed his knuckles against Troy's scalp and said, "Aw, Rooster, just admit you're gonna miss me. Come on, admit it."

"All right, all right," Troy squawked and Seth let him go. Troy grabbed him and pulled him close, kissing his lips, his chin and his jaw. Mouth next to Seth's ear, Troy whispered, "Is it so wrong that after thirty-six hours together, I'm still not ready to let you go?"

"Well, why didn't you just say so?" Seth grabbed Troy by the ears and planted a hard, smacking kiss on his lips. "I'll take some of that red curry and coconut shrimp and a side order of chicken skewers." He hurried around to the driver's side and got in but before he backed out, he rolled his window down and yelled, "And if you want to be accepted into the family, you could pick up some extra raw chicken for Kashmir and Silver!"

Troy did, of course, ask the cashier for some uncooked chicken to go along with their meals. The young woman looked at him like he was a little crazy, but if it meant making Seth happy, Troy would ask for just about anything. The ferrets themselves he had a love/hate relationship with. They were fun and cute and Seth loved them, but Seth loved them and it made Troy a little jealous and possessive, as ridiculous as that may be. He knew a lot of those feelings would ease up once he finally claimed the man, even if he had no intention of letting Seth in on that fact. Antagonizing his mate about his pets was a lot of fun.

The drive back to Seth's house seemed to take forever. Troy felt the familiar itch of his beast under his skin, like it was prowling back and forth looking for a way out. He hadn't thought about the possibility that spending all this time with Seth would have a negative effect on the tenuous hold he had on his humanity once they parted ways.

He could see now that being with his mate only made being away from him that much harder. The last few weeks, and particularly the last few days, had all but convinced Troy that Seth would accept him. Maybe the mating would need to take place sooner than he'd planned.

It was with that thought rolling around his mind that Troy pulled up to Seth's cottage. He grabbed the sack of food off his passenger seat and practically ran to knock on Seth's door, needing to smell, see and hear his mate. "It's open," he heard Seth call out and opened the door. Two little furballs immediately assaulted him, skittering around his feet.

"Well, hello to you, Thing One and Thing Two," Troy said sarcastically.

"Be nice," Seth called from the kitchen area.

"I hope you're talking to the furballs," Troy called out, "because they're climbing up my pant legs, and I'm fighting my protective instinct to cover my assets." He was actually surprised that Kashmir and Silver's own protective instincts didn't make them more cautious around him, knowing they could likely smell the predator in him. As ornery and rambunctious as they were, they probably either thought they were invincible or they were too stupid to be afraid of him.

When the girls hung off his leg trying to get at the bag in his hand, he realized they were less concerned about the scent of cougar and more concerned with the smell of their dinner. He scooped each of them up in his free hand and set them back down on the floor before kneeling and giving them a quick rub and then slowly walking into the dining area, avoiding squishing the eager ferrets along the way.

Seth was just finishing setting out plates and silverware by the time Troy made it the short distance. He tossed the food on the table, hung his jacket over the chair and walked right up to Seth, sliding his fingers into the slightly damp strands of his hair and pulling him down for a kiss. His beast immediately relinquished its stranglehold on Troy's body, especially when Seth reciprocated by grabbing Troy's ass and pulling their bodies together. Troy moaned, and Seth didn't hesitate to push his tongue into Troy's mouth.

The sound of a bag rustling caught both their attentions. "Ladies," Seth gasped, "that is not very good manners." Seth removed them from the table and put them back on the floor before grabbing some extra plates and dividing up the chicken between them. Troy barely held back a groan when Seth bent over right in front of him to place the plates on the floor.

The heat of their greeting still flowed through his veins, but his more protective instincts kept him from acting on it. His mate was likely starving, and Troy needed to make sure he was fed and taken care of before anything else, despite how much he wanted to continue where they left off. Apparently Seth had the same thoughts because he palmed Troy's ass when he came back into the room and growled in his ear, "You know what my favorite meal was when I was a kid?"

"I have no idea." Troy swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"Opposite Edibles. It's when you get to devour your dessert before the main course."

Damn, Troy really wanted to go there but he knew in the back of his mind he'd be thinking about his mate's other physical needs, like food and—yeah, that's all he could come up with at the moment. "Let's eat first," Troy's voice came out huskier than he expected. "And then maybe we can play some Jenga."

"Fine," Seth huffed and it was adorable. Troy would never get tired of discovering new aspects of the man. Like his sadistic side, which came through when he finished with, "But the loser has to submit to five minutes of tickling by the winner."

Unable to stay sullen for long, Seth's warm and sunny disposition quickly returned as they ate their spicy meal together. Troy loved the way their legs constantly brushed against one another under the table and the fact that Seth felt comfortable enough to drink out of his glass after he'd emptied his own. But to Troy, the thing that was more meaningful than all of that was the simple contentment of being in each other's company.

They talked. They *listened*. Seth told him about his laid back, drug-free, super-hippie parents and how they all slept outside so often in the summer that on more than one occasion someone reported them to the police as homeless squatters. Troy found himself sharing stories about his own family as well, leaving out the part about them shifting into cougars of course. For the first time ever, Troy didn't feel that familiar wash of despair that always came over him when he thought about his brothers, mother and father.

It was a bittersweet relief to be able to remember the time his brothers took him to the field with the shotgun to teach him how to shoot. They'd told him to prop his shoulder against the trunk of a tree for support, knowing full well that when the gun kicked back it would hurt, but not as much as the ass whooping they got after his parents had to run him to the hospital with a broken

collarbone. When Troy finished telling the story, he wiped tears of laughter and happiness from his eyes. With his mate by his side, he knew the raw, open wound of his past would soon heal.

Finished eating and ready to relax, they cleaned up the dishes and empty containers before moving into the living room where they set up the Jenga tower in the middle of Seth's coffee table. The ferrets curled up under the coffee table, resting between them, bellies stuffed and bloated. Troy couldn't decide whether he wanted to play to win or lose so he simply let the blocks fall where they may, which resulted in a check in the win column for Seth.

As long as his mate's hands were on him, Troy didn't really mind losing. Hell, Troy would have lost a game of chicken with a rhino shifter to get Seth to straddle his hips like he was doing right now. "You lost," Seth said in between quick, sucking kisses.

"Funny, I kind of feel like I won." Troy cupped the round globes of Seth's ass in his hands and squeezed.

"Nah ah," Seth tsked. "Hands above your head, mister," he ordered, grabbing Troy's wrists and lifting his arms above his head where he pinned them to the floor with one hand. "Now keep them there. It's the first rule of paying the tickle tax, no touching."

"Ung," Troy groaned, lifting his hips just a little so Seth could feel what he was doing to him. He knew, of course, if the wicked grin on his face was anything to go by.

"So, Rooster, I believe five minutes was the agreed upon time. You keep track of that, okay? I'm going to be busy."

Seth's nimble fingers dug into his ribs, wiggling and sliding around on the cotton of his T-shirt. Troy's legs jerked underneath Seth and he bit his lip to hold in the giggles. When Seth's hands moved upward, towards his exposed underarms, Troy was prepared for the assault. He withstood it for about thirty seconds before he gave up and writhed and twisted about, nearly bucking Seth off of him.

The next minute or so was a blur. Seth's hands were everywhere, behind his knees, running along the arches of his feet and at the spot where his neck and shoulder met. Troy was breathless from laughter and exertion. "Please," he begged, certain this was the worst kind of hell ever. Then Seth's movements slowed and Troy realized he hadn't known torture until that moment.

Pushing up Troy's shirt, Seth said, "Hmm, I don't think you're out of debt yet. You still owe me some tax. Perhaps a change of tactics is in order." He stopped talking then, putting his mouth to better use. Troy shook his head back and forth, trying to unscramble his brain from the shock of Seth's tongue flicking over his nipple.

Troy arched his back and cried out when Seth took the pebbled bud between his teeth and bit down. Rules forgotten, Troy moved his hands to bury them in Seth's hair at the base of his neck, pulling him in closer and urging him to give him more. It was like putting a match to gasoline; the situation combusted, resulting in an explosion of kissing, grinding and biting.

Troy nearly came in his pants when Seth shoved his shirt up over his head so he could lick a line from Troy's belly button, through the grooves of his abs, over the ridges of his ribs and up across the patch of hair under his arm before biting the thick muscle of his bicep. When he repeated the move on Troy's opposite side, all bets were off.

Sitting up, Troy grabbed the hem of Seth's shirt and stripped it off over his head. Seth had the most amazing chest. His skin was nearly translucent up close, except for three freckles in the dip of his solar plexus and the deep peach of his nipples. "I love peaches," Troy growled before wrapping his lips around Seth's nipple, flicking it with his tongue.

Arms crossed behind Troy's head, Seth held Troy against him as he worked the man's chest with his mouth. At some point, their hips began rocking against one another. Troy scraped his nails down Seth's back, causing him to hiss. He wanted to bite, wanted to claim.

No! Troy did not want it to go like this. He wanted to make Seth his mate, but he wanted to do so honestly and openly, not by taking away the man's choice. It was a strange dichotomy. On one hand his beast wanted Seth, desperately, but on the other hand the man in Troy would not harm or force the man he loved in any way. And, yes, he loved Seth, both instinctually as his mate and emotionally as a human.

Unable to trust himself to continue on the lusty path down which they were headed, Troy rolled Seth underneath him and began tickling him like mad. Seth may have been surprised by the turn of events but he went right along with it, laughing and yelling out, "Uncle!"

The air whooshed out of Troy's lungs when Seth twisted his torso, exposing the skin of his left shoulder to Troy's gaze. He scrambled backwards off of

Seth's lap, knocking into the coffee table and scattering Jenga pieces all over the floor. The sound of the blocks hitting the floor wasn't nearly loud enough to drown out the noise of Troy's mind shattering into a million splintered pieces because there, on his mate's body, was a brown birthmark in the shape of a hand cradling a leaf. It was the marking of a Leshy.

"No, no, no." Troy's voice cracked with agony. Seth got on his knees and moved towards Troy, but he scrambled to his feet and backed away until he hit a wall. Troy grabbed handfuls of his hair, pulling it hard as he doubled over. "No, no. It can't be! Why?" Troy rocked back and forth mumbling to himself.

"God, Troy? What's wrong?" Seth's heavy hand landed on Troy's shoulder, causing him to jolt. He knocked Seth's arm away with bruising force and his beast roared. His cougar would not allow anyone, even himself, to hurt his mate, but right now, the human side of Troy was more lethal. Seth was one of them! A fucking Leshy!

"Don't touch me," Troy spat out. He could feel himself on the verge of shifting. He had to get out of there, so he shoved past Seth, grabbed his jacket from the chair, and ran out the front door. The air felt frigid against his overheated face, but it did nothing to cool the rage inside him. "Fuck!" Troy yelled. His car keys were not in his pocket and there was no way he could go back inside, he was barely hanging on.

His mate was one of his sworn enemies. His mind, unable to comprehend the revelation, began to splinter once again. Images flicked through his mind like a spliced reel of film, some fantasies and others nightmares. The first time he saw Seth standing out in the sun, only now his hair was flames and his hands like claws. The look of love on his mate's face when Troy handed him the piece of petrified wood. Seth, hands and face covered in mud as he cackled.

Shoulders hunched and head in his hand, Troy ran towards the woods. As soon as he was under the cover of foliage, he shifted, shredding his clothes and taking off at a sprint, anger and heartbreak fueling his body. He ran through the night and well into the next one before he collapsed somewhere near the Canadian border.

With exhaustion came some relief from the fury and pain that'd been gnawing at him. He lay there, completely still except for the rise and fall of his abdomen, and was able to finally think. He couldn't believe he hadn't noticed the signs before, his mate's earthy scent and the way he was with plants and animals. He should have asked how Seth came to live in that exact cottage. He was probably related to the crazy selfish bitch who killed his mom.

Had everything been a lie? A trick? Some kind of sick revenge? Troy's thoughts began to fan the dying flame of his anger again. He'd been a fool, trusted his beast's instincts and let his fear of going feral control his choices. At least Troy would never again have to worry about that. The searing pain of his mate's betrayal would forever ground him in his humanity. The man was in charge now and he knew exactly what he had to do.

Chapter Six

For the first time he could ever remember, Seth felt true, bone-weary sadness. At first, when Troy freaked out and ran all but screaming out of his house three days ago, all he'd felt was confusion. He'd gone from being fully ready to give himself in every way to the man he'd fallen in love with, to completely alone in the blink of an eye.

He'd called Troy several times that night and gotten no answer. He barely slept, trying to figure out what had gone wrong and worrying about Troy being alone in the woods at night. He didn't figure out until the next day that Troy had not taken his car because Kashmir and Silver stole his keys at some point and hid them under the sofa.

When Troy didn't answer any of his calls again all that day, Seth decided to go to his house under the guise of returning his car. Troy wasn't there. Seth didn't know how he knew it, he just did. Visions of Troy out with another man assaulted him as he walked back home. He had himself so worked up by the time he got back to his place, he barely made it inside the door before he began sobbing uncontrollably.

Poor Kash and Sil tiptoed around him, nudging him with their noses. He could feel their worry and concern. And that's when he realized something was wrong. Something besides the obvious at least, but he couldn't focus enough to figure it out, so he did what his mother taught him to do when his mind spun out of control.

He went outside to the yard and sat right in the middle of the grass, legs crossed and hands resting face up on his knees. He concentrated on his breathing and did his best to clear his mind. The familiar feeling of being connected to the earth, of tendrils of energy feeding him and taking from him in perfect balance, was there, but there was a void as well. That wasn't right though, it was more like a cord that'd been cut.

When Seth opened his eyes something snapped into place. The day he first met Troy, he could swear he remembered feeling like they connected on a whole new level. He'd brushed it off as infatuation, but thinking about it now he felt crazy, because he would swear they'd been destined for one another.

Seth threw himself back on the ground, having no clue what the hell was going on. He decided to call his mom, mostly because she understood his view

of the world and could hopefully make some sense of the way he was feeling, but also because she was his mom, and he needed her.

“Hey, sweetie.” His mom’s voice soothed some of his frazzled nerves.

“Mom,” Seth’s voice squeaked and then he completely lost it, clutching his phone and crying. He’d always been a crier, taught at a young age that it didn’t mean anything about his strength, even if it did make him feel physically weak and wrung out when he was all done. “Sorry,” he sniffed. “I didn’t mean to freak out like that.”

“Seth, honey,” his mom spoke softly, “don’t apologize for your feelings. Just please tell me what’s wrong. I’m starting to freak out a little too.”

Seth told her all about his weekend with Troy and how everything felt so true and perfectly balanced. He laughed a little when he recalled for her how neither of them had wanted to part and how they came up with an excuse to continue their time together. His mirth didn’t last, however, when he remembered how Troy behaved just a few hours later.

When his voice grew hoarse and there was nothing else he could think of to share, he finally stopped talking and asked his mom for her thoughts. “I’ll be there in an hour,” was her only response before she hung up the phone.

It took two days for his mother to explain everything to him and answer all his questions. On the third day, he asked her to leave. He needed some space and time to process everything. Admittedly, he was a bit hurt and angry that his parents had hidden something so important from him. He believed her when she said they’d done it to protect him and allow him to forge his own path, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t still be pissed about it.

An entire week had gone by since learning he was actually born of a race of supernatural beings and that Troy was likely the only remaining son of a family of cougar shifters. He understood now why Troy left him, but it didn’t diminish the ache a damn bit.

Troy must have seen the mark on his shoulder that signified his heritage and, unlike Seth, he knew what it meant. Troy had quickly put it all together, like pieces of a puzzle, and realized Seth was the nephew of the woman he felt was responsible for the deaths of his entire family.

Seth longed for a chance to talk with him about it, to explain things the way his mom had, but he knew the opportunity would never come. His mom had thought maybe Seth was Troy’s mate based upon the things he’d told her. Seth

wished with all of his soul that it were true, because maybe then Troy would be drawn to him, maybe allow him a chance to prove they were perfect for one another.

He was trying to accept that he may never get that chance. Before his mom left, she made him promise he would allow the emotions to run their course but he would not wallow in self-pity. For a few days he hadn't even tried to keep that promise. He lost a little weight, food didn't taste right and there was a constant gnawing in his gut so it was hard to tell when he was hungry.

This morning when Seth woke though, he knew it was time to start putting himself back together the best he could. He was not under the illusion that he'd ever feel normal again, that severed cord would always ache, like an old break. Painting was a great way for Seth to get his emotions out, so he spent the better part of the day in his studio. He did a series of small canvases that included the sunset he and Troy shared from the peak of the mountain, the tree they sat in to take a selfie, and the garden full of various yellow and blue flowers, their favorite colors, they'd planted in Troy's yard.

It felt good to memorialize these things. He even tried to paint from memory the cougar he saw in his backyard, now knowing it had been Troy, but he couldn't quite get it right and gave up around dinner time, wanting to take the girls out to play. Kashmir and Silver seemed to share his burden. They weren't eating as much and sulked about most of the day. He couldn't allow his own emotions to affect his babies any longer.

Standing at his backdoor, Seth took a deep cleansing breath and gave himself a little pep talk. He could do this. He could go out and be loud and playful and, if not happy, at least not sad. They played tug-of-war with a rope that had three ends, played hide-n-seek and ran around acting like their rambunctious and spontaneous selves. Well, for the most part. Seth's heart wasn't quite in it, but Kash and Sil were enjoying their playtime and, in that moment, it was enough for him.

Sometime during a round of pillowcase carousel, Seth became aware of a burning sensation in his chest. He closed his eyes and concentrated on his magical essence like his mom taught him to once she opened up about Leshy abilities. He could practically feel the air and forest around him change, become charged with a dark and primal energy.

His eyes snapped open. Troy. He was there and he was agitated. Seth just hoped it was a case of the nerves and not anger or hatred that pulsed against his

senses. Just in case though, he scooped up Kash and Sil and put them in the house before following the pull of his connection with Troy to the edge of his yard.

Now that Seth's mind was open to his magic and Troy was here, he was certain they were in fact mates. Troy's tendril of energy called out to his, their ends made only for one another and unable to match up with any other person in existence. That connection had never been cut like he thought, it had actually never been forged.

"I know it's you," Seth spoke into the empty forest. "I can feel you. I can *feel* you." He waited, heart beating in his throat for a response. When none came he spoke again, unwilling to give up. "I'm so sorry about the way things happened." He took a single step into the woods. "Please believe me when I say I didn't know."

A chuffing sound drew Seth's attention to his left. He squinted, trying to see through the trees and brush. A flash of gold drew his focus, and he inhaled sharply at the site of the magnificent cougar prowling back and forth in the distance. "Wow." Seth's breath released in a rush. "I can't believe you really are a cougar. You're beautiful."

Chills raced down Seth's spine when the cougar let out a scream that was filled with anger and pain. Unafraid and unwilling to give up, Seth whispered, "I miss you." He guessed Troy's keen hearing would pick up his words and he was right. The cougar twisted his head back and forth and let out another anguishing yowl.

"I understand if you hate me. I can't imagine the pain of losing your family." Seth told Troy when the sound of his torment ended. Still Troy didn't approach him, continuing to keep his distance and slinking back and forth. Seth felt frustrated. "Fuck, Troy, could you please just shift and talk to me? You owe me at least that much."

Troy stopped pacing, looked straight at him and hissed. Seth felt himself starting to get angry at the way Troy was treating him. He needed to make him understand that he wasn't the enemy. "She died of loneliness and heartbreak. Cecelia. Did you know that our kind can do that?" Seth's voice grew louder. "She and your mother were best friends. They loved each other, and I know your mom wouldn't want you to blame my aunt for what happened to her."

Troy's only response was another rumbling hiss but Seth kept going. "Goddamn it, Troy, look past your own bias and fear. You'll see that they

shared a bond that was so deep either would have given their lives for the other.” Seth took another heavy step forward. His throat felt dry and his next words came out raspy, heavy with emotion. “I think you know what I say is true because we share a similar bond don’t we? Only one that goes even deeper than friendship.”

Seth’s words finally seemed to have an effect on Troy. He stopped, turned in Seth’s direction and moved forward, stalking his prey. Seth held his ground and continued. “You’d rather die than live without me, wouldn’t you?” Troy came to a halt mere feet away from Seth now. He crouched low to the ground, waiting. Seth spoke the words he hoped would pull his lover and mate the rest of the way. “I know I’m right because that’s how I feel about you. I love you, Troy.”

Troy pounced, catching Seth by surprise and hitting him square in the chest, knocking him down. The air whooshed out of Seth’s lungs and his back collided with the ground. Two-hundred and fifty pounds of pissed-off cougar landed on his chest, and for the first time while he was in Troy’s presence, Seth felt a small spark of fear. He covered it up by saying, “That’s not quite the response I was hoping for. I imagined you’d be human when you jumped me.”

In one moment Seth lay under a snarling, snapping cougar, and in the next, he felt warm naked skin against his own. Troy had shifted back into his human form. He held Seth down with a hand around his throat. “After my mother, my father, my grandfather and both my brothers died, I vowed to kill any Leshy I came across. I didn’t want your kind destroying any more lives with your mischief.”

“Troy—”

“Shut up.” Troy’s hand tightened around Seth’s throat, but he wasn’t afraid. “But I can’t kill you. God help me, I can’t.” Troy leaned over and kissed Seth’s lips. The pressure on Seth’s throat gentled, and he could feel Troy’s thumb rubbing along the corded flesh. Every ounce of Troy’s heart was poured into that kiss, the dark and rotten parts as well as the light and beautiful ones.

Troy broke away. Seth waited patiently for Troy to gather his thoughts, knowing Troy had more he needed to say. “I’ve been angry and alone for so long.”

Seth couldn’t help himself, he had to touch Troy. Slowly running his hand up Troy’s arm and across his shoulder, he brought his palm to rest against his

mate's cheek. Troy turned into his hand just a fraction, but it let Seth know he yearned for his touch.

“I was so close to going feral.” Troy’s voice was low, and he looked directly at Seth as he spoke. “The curse would have finally finished off the last shifter in my line. And then I smelled your scent on the wind and I thought I was saved because I found my mate, but I was really saved because I found *you*. Your brightness calls to the darkness inside me and gives me balance. I want you as my mate, Seth. Forever.”

“My heart is already yours, Troy. You just need to claim it.”

Troy arched his neck and roared to the sky. He grabbed Seth by the hair, tilting his head back and exposing his neck. The bite was not gentle or orgasmic. It was hard and deep and so very painful, but it was nature’s way and Seth fed off it.

Energy and life flowed between them, making Seth’s every cell come alive. When Troy withdrew his fangs from Seth’s neck and licked the wound to staunch the flow of blood, Seth’s magic surged and his cock hardened against his leg. He never felt anything like the instinct that coursed through his body, urging him to take control, complete the mating and cement their bond for all eternity.

Seth pulled Troy against his body and rolled until he lay on top of him. Cat eyes stared up at him, and Seth knew why he hadn’t gotten them right in his painting. There were flecks of green amongst the gold. He slammed his mouth down against Troy’s. He wasn’t a shifter, but he sure as hell felt like an animal as he bit and licked at Troy’s mouth. He took each of Troy’s wrists in his hands and slammed them to the ground above the man’s head.

“Yes,” Troy hissed, tearing his mouth away from Seth’s. “Claim me. I’ve been waiting forever to feel my mate inside me.”

Seth straddled Troy’s thighs, taking in an eyeful of the man’s cut cock. It reminded Seth of Troy’s animal side, strong and powerful. He rose to his knees and reached to the sky, arching his back and letting his magic flow through him. It felt so right, so ancient and primal, like the very beginning of time, to mate here, out in the open air, upon the dirt and earth that gave everything life.

Seth bent over Troy’s body because he needed to taste him, smell him; needed the unique taste of Troy on his tongue and in his nostrils. He ran his nose across Troy’s collarbone and followed the muscle and sinew along his

neck, inhaling deeply. He could smell the crisp freshness of newly formed leaves and the cool chill of the wind. There was something else, too, something that was just Troy.

Needing more, Seth scraped his teeth across the thick muscle that ran from Troy's neck down to his shoulder. At the same time he pushed Troy's arm back up, sliding it along the soft grass until his elbow rested above the messy brown mop of his head. Seth began his exploration at the peak of Troy's nipple. He licked and sucked the round bud briefly before turning his head and diving into the potent core of his mate's scent.

Seth took it all in, his face buried in the soft nest of hair beneath Troy's arm. The dark, musky-scented air flooded his lungs until they burned. Troy moaned beneath him and reached up with his other arm, taking a handful of Seth's hair and using it to hold him against Troy's flesh. Seth licked and sucked the skin and muscle all around Troy's underarm, moved his nose down through the patch of hair again and then bit and laved at the smooth brown skin covering Troy's ribs.

Down and dirty sex was nothing new to Seth, but this was so much more. It was intimate on a level he never before experienced. He wasn't just being driven by his physical desires. It wasn't just about being emotionally in love with Troy, it was instinct and magic, and it was pure. There was nothing they couldn't do with one another's bodies, no boundaries or walls between them.

Seth jumped to his feet and divulged himself of every stitch of clothing, wanting nothing unnatural between them. He sank to his knees then, this time straddling Troy's chest, guided by an innate need to dominate and own every part of Troy.

Words weren't needed between them. Troy knew exactly what Seth intended. He opened his mouth and raised his head off the ground, not even flinching as Seth fed his uncut cock into the wet, willing cavern of Troy's mouth and all the way into his throat. Seth threw his own head back and called out into the air.

He felt the currents shift around them, felt his connection with the earth along his knees and shins. But most of all, he felt that strand deep in his core that signified his mating with Troy. When he accepted the bite, their energies wove together along the pathway. Seth pulled out, felt his foreskin slide against his shaft. He stopped right when Troy's lower lip caught on the flared edge of

his cockhead, taking a moment to enjoy the sight of Troy's mouth wrapped around him.

His dick throbbed along with the pulsating rhythm of their life bond. If Seth closed his eyes he could almost see it. The glowing fiber was new, fragile and not yet complete. He wished Troy was able to see the beauty of their mating like this, but the strands of life all around them was something only his kind could see.

He bet Troy could feel it though, feel how much they needed one another, how perfect they were together. He wanted Troy to feel it all, wanted to finish this between them, forging a bond so unbreakable nothing could touch it. Seth slammed his hips forward, owning Troy's mouth, and watched as Troy's eyes rolled back in his head.

Seth reached out and tugged the hair on the back of Troy's head, encouraging him to lay his head down on the soft grass. He followed him down, never breaking his dick's contact with Troy's lips and tongue. Once they were settled, Seth rose above Troy in a prone position so he could thrust down into him. His ass muscles clenched and released and a glorious burn settled in his lower back.

Troy took everything he gave. He didn't have a choice. This was Seth's claiming, Seth showing his mate his strength and ownership. It was nature's way and it was absolute. Troy's hands suddenly dug into Seth's hips, the passion of their coupling causing the tips of his fingers to shift into claws. Seth felt the sharp sting of penetration and the warm trickle of blood down his side.

"Yes!" Seth growled. This was the way sex was meant to be, out in the open, nothing held back. It was sweat and cum, blood and the essence of life. It was raw power and masculine beauty, and it made Seth's balls draw up. He pulled out of Troy's mouth with a roar, saliva dripping from his cock and leaving a trail as he slid down Troy's body to lay between his outstretched legs.

Seth bit the inside of Troy's thigh, stuck his nose deep in Troy's groin and inhaled, the scent of his lover strong here as well. Seth wrapped a hand around Troy's ball sac and tugged hard, claiming ownership of his seed, as he took the head of Troy's cock into his mouth. Troy shot up off the ground with a strangled cry, flopped back down to the ground and arched his back.

Seth would paint this moment in the near future, never wanting to forget the sight of Troy in the throes of passion, bronzed skin glistening against the lush

green blades of grass. Seth did that to Troy's body, to his soul. He would never, ever share that painting with another living being. Troy, and every intimacy the man allowed, belonged to Seth.

Seth loved the way Troy thrashed about as he worked the man's cock and balls, but he needed to be in control so he threw a leg over one of Troy's and hooked an arm around the thick thigh of his other leg, shoving his shoulder tight up against Troy's hamstring to force him to keep his lower body still. Seth devoured Troy's entire length, shoved his tongue in the slit, and dragged his teeth across the sensitive head

Spit and drool dripped from Seth's chin down Troy's length, along the seam of his balls and into the crack of his ass. Seth didn't care. They were free from all of the things that held people back from fulfilling their deepest desires, having no room between them for ridiculous human concerns about mess and bodily fluids.

Feeling Troy's balls pull tight and his shaft pulse, Seth released him from his mouth, running his lips down the thick vein that ran the length of Troy's dick to his balls. Sucking them each into his mouth and rolling them across his tongue, before moving lower.

Seth pulled the heavy sac of Troy's balls up to where they fell on either side of his shaft, exposing his perineum and the ring of his asshole. He drew the tight flesh of Troy's taint into his mouth and sucked on it hard. Troy's thighs flexed like he was trying to gain leverage. Whether to shove himself harder against Seth's mouth or pull away from Seth's assault, he didn't know and didn't care. He would bring pleasure to his mate any way he saw fit.

And right now Seth wanted to feast on the private entrance into Troy's body. He kissed the puckered skin reverently before swirling his tongue around it teasingly and then dipping inside. Troy went limp beneath him and a deep moan filled the air. Seth smiled at that, stiffened his tongue and did everything he could to drag more of those sounds from Troy's throat.

When the sound of Troy's pleasure reached its crescendo, Seth rose to his knees, ready to lock the final piece of their bond into place. Seth urged a panting, shaking Troy onto his side. He pushed against the back of Troy's knee until he bent his leg, and then pushed Troy's top leg up so it pulled his smooth, round ass open.

Seth used the pre-cum pouring out of his cock to coat it completely. He straddled Troy's unbent leg, lay against his hip and arm, and wrapped his arms

around Troy's back and chest. "You belong to me, Troy," Seth whispered in his ear. "All your dark edges are mine. And I'm yours too. I'll give you all the light in my soul. I love you." And with that, Seth thrust into Troy hard, not giving an ounce of gentleness. He knew the cougar respected him for it, while the man trusted him for it.

With each thrust, Seth could feel their link solidifying. With each grip of Troy's passage, he could see the individual fibers of energy weaving together. He held Troy so tight the man would have bruises as he drove into him over and over, every snap of his hips full force.

The animalistic frenzy of their mating was reaching its peak. Seth needed to come inside Troy's body, fill him with his thick spend. He sought Troy's cock with his hand, gripped the swollen flesh tight and pulled in time with his pounding rhythm. Seth felt the energy and life around him enter his body, like it was being sucked into a vacuum. It built up and up in his every cell, until he thought he was going to explode, before leaving him in a blinding rush as he came inside Troy's body, feeling the warmth of Troy's own cum spread over his fingers.

They lay there for a long while afterwards, murmuring intimate words between them and basking in the bright glow of their new mingled energies. The sound of scratching finally reached Seth's ears. He slowly got to his feet, feeling physically drained from the intensity of their joining, and reached down to help Troy up.

They held each other there, standing naked in the middle of Seth's yard, seemingly unable to stop touching and caressing one another. The scratching noise grew louder, and Seth reluctantly stepped back from Troy. They both wore the biggest shit-eating grins and then broke into joyous laughter. "Holy shit," Seth barked. "That was out of this fucking world."

"Yeah," Troy winked, "I'm sure glad I didn't kill you."

"Funny," Seth deadpanned. "For that I'm letting the girls out." Seth walked to his backdoor, turned back to look at Troy and added, "And fair warning, they love to play with round dangling objects. And their teeth are real sharp." He opened the door and Kashmir and Silver darted out. When he turned back towards Troy, a cougar now stood where the man was mere seconds before. He gave the big cat a dirty look. "Cheater."

Seth found his clothes and put them back on. He knew not everything was settled between him and Troy, but what he knew with even more certainty was

that they would get through it all and come out stronger for it. The sun may be setting on this day, but they would see many more to come.

Seth settled into his usual spot on the smooth stone, the sun's rays warming his skin. When Troy settled his huge furry body next to him and laid his head in Seth's lap, it warmed his heart as well. Kash and Sil climbed on Troy's back and curled up together, making Troy chuff.

"Oh, stop, you big pussy cat." Seth scolded Troy. "You're stuck with us now so you may as well admit you love them." Troy tilted his head, the equivalent of shrugging his shoulders.

"Well, I know you love me so you'll just have to put up with them. And I promise I'll put up with you, that is, so long as you don't ever wake me again at the ass crack of dawn. Rooster."

The End

Author Bio

Gina A. Rogers is an amazon living in South Central Pennsylvania where she grew up and will never be allowed to forget she once sported a mullet. She has mild OCD issues with regards to symmetry and reading order and is obsessed with the letter V. She loves nerds and men who wield swords (pun intended), especially while wearing skirts of the tartan or even leather variety. Although she loves reading dark and tragic stories, the ones that play out in her head and find their way to paper are fun, snarky and always end happily ever after!

Kyle Adams started out dabbling with writing gay romance stories for fun. He writes what makes him laugh and hopes anyone who reads his work laughs with him. Kyle had three books nominated in the 2013 Goodreads.com M/M Romance Group Readers' Choice Awards and two books nominated in 2012 for the same event. His free story, Dirty Cop won Best Short Story in 2013.

Contact & Media Info

You can find out about Gina's other stories on Goodreads or email her any time.

[Email](#) | [Goodreads](#)

Kyle loves hearing from readers. Always feel free to contact him or add on any of the following:

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MEANT TO BE

By Rawiya

Photo Description

A black man hugging a white man from behind, both are shirtless. White male has a tattoo on chest.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm a thirty-something successful African-American male and I'm gay. I don't fit the stereo-type for gay men in my neighborhood, flaming, sissified, acting like queens/women. I'm what my mother and most African-American females refer to a catch. I appreciate the female form but it doesn't do it for me, I love men! My mother always told me growing up "don't bring no white girl up in my house". Not a problem Mom, no women in my future... so how do I tell her I'm gay and the man I love is white. He completes me... he laughs at my jokes, holds me when I'm feeling insecure, and he doesn't judge me. So how do I tell my mother and the rest of my family that I'm gay and in love with a white man who is my everything?

Thank you,

Bookjunkie12

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: interracial, librarian, homophobia, racism, tattoo, coming out

Word count: 10,087

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MEANT TO BE

By Rawiya

Chapter One

“Thad, Thad!” Lisa’s shriek woke Thaddeus Dawson from the most amazing dream. If only that vision would come true, just to save him the heartache to come. “Thad?” Lisa shook him repeatedly.

“Hmm? Yes, Lisa. Yeah, uh...” Thaddeus sat up straight, and his cheeks flushed. He was embarrassed about falling asleep in the library lounge. “I must’ve dozed off while reading this book.” Thaddeus removed his black rimmed glasses and set his copy of *Cross My Heart* by James Patterson on the table.

“Oh, I just bet you did, Thad. You’ve been *real* busy at night, huh?” Lisa lowered her purple frames to the bridge of her nose and swiped the wayward red strands out of her face. She flashed Thaddeus a smirky smile and waltzed to the other side of his chair. “How’s the new *man* doing, hmm?”

Thaddeus returned her grin with an even wider one. “He’s fine. Still trying to get things right with his life, but we’re coming along.” Thaddeus quickly stood, not wanting to discuss his love life with resident gossiper, Lisa Stanley. She could be a pain in the ass at times, and when she was bored, she didn’t take issue with sharing not-so-common knowledge about him.

“Oh come on, Thad. When you gonna spill about him, hmm? And when are you going to tell that meddling mom of yours that you’re gay?”

You’re gay... you’re gay... you’re gay.

Hearing the words echoing in his brain, Thaddeus clutched his chest and sucked in a breath. He’d been avoiding the humongous task of coming out to his family for months, fearing the worst. He’d read the horror stories; he’d seen gay friends shunned by those who claimed to love them before they came out. And yes, they all came out fine, for lack of a better word. They survived, but Thaddeus couldn’t see himself telling his mom about being gay. She thought she’d raised a woman-loving gentleman, not a gentleman-loving gentleman. And then there was the added pressure of...

“Don’t bring no white woman into my house!”

Carolyn Dawson spent many a day preaching that to him and his brother, Spencer, at the breakfast table, while Willis Dawson, their father, was alive, and beyond. No one of the Caucasian variety was allowed in the Dawson house

unless they were selling something or preaching the words from the Bible. Even the former would be under scrutiny, but the bottom line was, neither Dawson parent approved of their children being in interracial relationships.

With Thaddeus now being in his early thirties, college educated, and making good money as Senior Librarian at the Adams Park branch in Chicago, he was not only dating outside of his race, but he was seeing someone of the same gender.

Oh boy.

What would Carolyn think of him now?

Trembling slightly, Thaddeus grabbed a Styrofoam cup, filling it with coffee. Although not a fan of the house blend, he'd settle for it just to wake up and get back to work.

"Thaddeus?" Lisa stepped back around the corner, still smiling like the cat that ate the canary. "Come on, man. You have to go on and tell your mom about Seth. I've never seen you so happy until you started dating him."

Thaddeus stopped before taking a sip. He cocked a curious eyebrow. "Really? Does it seem that obvious?" He sighed inwardly and winced, readying himself for the grainy concoction he was about to drink.

"Yeah, and frankly, I think it's kind of cute." Lisa dragged her nubile fingers across the counter. "I mean, nothing hotter than man love, you know, and... oh..." Lisa gasped and clapped her hands. "Did you notice we have gay romances in the library now? Squee!"

Thaddeus reached in his shirt pocket, grabbing his specs. "Oh goody." He rolled his eyes. "Lisa, just because I'm gay doesn't mean..."

"Mean what, Thad? Don't you read them? I mean, I do, and frankly I think gay books are the hottest thing on the planet." She fanned herself, eyes wide. "Whew, the one I read last night, brother on brother, wow."

"Lisa, not now, okay? Maybe later." Thaddeus interrupted her, putting his hand up in front of his face. As much as he wanted to hear about Lisa's stroke book recommendation, Thaddeus turned her down for the time being.

At times he and Lisa would do lunch at one of the local eateries, but today Thaddeus was more concerned with sleeping than eating. After all, he'd spent a good portion of the night with the new love of his life, Seth Gottlieb. They'd only been dating two months, and even though they hadn't made it to the

bedroom just yet, Thaddeus was *almost* positive this was the man he'd be spending his life with. And, ultimately, the man that would finally force Thaddeus to tell his family the truth.

"Okay, well, if not now, then after work? And you'll share some details about the date last night, right?"

Thaddeus grimaced and finished the coffee. He tossed the cup in the wastebasket. "There isn't much to tell, Lisa. We went out for dinner and took a walk by the lake." Thaddeus leaned against the counter and looked up into the lights, thinking of last evening with fondness. "We kissed a few times and held one another for a while, then went home."

Lisa tilted her head. "That's it? No sex, no rimming, no..."

"Lisa!" Thaddeus laughed and covered his mouth, feeling the heat rush to his cheeks. No doubt he'd thought about what Seth's body would taste like. He already knew about his slim, kissable lips. His neck, which he'd sampled many a time already, and then his ears; they were both delicious. Yes, that was as far as they'd gotten. Not even to second base.

Thaddeus lowered his voice and exhaled deeply. He wished he hadn't gotten into this conversation, but he had to tell someone else other than his gay friends. "No, not yet. We haven't gone that far, because... because he told me we won't have sex until I come out," he managed.

"Well damn, Thad, that's just cruel. Why haven't you told your mom? Aren't you horny?" Lisa appeared perplexed.

Thaddeus nodded and pursed his lips. He didn't want to admit she was right, but what else could he say? Of course he was horny; the man was hot. "Miss Lisa, I want this man more than I want to breathe, but I don't think I can handle my mother being disappointed." Thaddeus toyed with his suspenders and eyed the cracks under his feet. "She made it *very* clear from day one what she wants and expects from me. Admitting I'm gay will tear her apart."

Had a good time last night. Can't wait for more, Love Seth.

Seth Gottlieb punched the last few letters in for his text and shoved his cell into his shirt pocket. He hadn't been able to return Thad's message until now, because his phone bill hadn't been paid in over a week.

It sucks being unemployed.

Seth sighed heavily, wondering where he'd get the money to eat this week and next. Thank goodness for his mother who didn't mind kicking him down some cash every so often, any time he looked pitiful. This time, however, Seth was determined to make it on his own without asking anyone, including his well-to-do boyfriend; nothing more embarrassing than asking your man for money when you hadn't even slept together yet.

What about after?

Seth grimaced at the thought and leaned against the wall, hoping he'd be the next one called. His unemployment benefits were screwed up, which was why he was wasting a whole day in line at employment security instead of searching for his next gig. His company, Braders & Levi, had gone belly up. The owners had to shut down due to lack of business. Seth had always considered himself in the lower class but never had he been jobless. This was truly one of the worst things to ever happen in his entire life. Despite this, Seth thanked the Jewish God above for his first breath and the sun rising outside his window every day.

And yet, even when he informed Thaddeus he might be unemployed *very* soon, living with other gay friends just to make ends meet, and losing his car to the repo man, this overly smart and attractive man still took Seth in. Seth thought he was crazy for wanting to date him with all that baggage but then again, perhaps Thaddeus thought Seth could inspire him to do something he'd himself done over fifteen years ago: come out to his family and friends.

Yes, coming out to the people he loved, risking shame by being out, yet proud for his own sake. Luckily for him, his mother was very accepting, saying he was her son no matter what. As for his father, he only shook his head and said something about how he hadn't raised a Jewish faggot, but as long as Seth stayed faithful to his religion, he'd have to live with it. Seth never forgot that day and hoped to inspire others with his story. Most of all, he hoped to get Thaddeus to do the same.

"Jerry Taleser." In an annoying, nasally voice, the desk clerk called out another name.

"Damn it." Seth rolled his eyes and glanced at his watch, which now read quarter past three. "Why can't they call me? I've been here since eight this morning. I could be out looking for employment right now, you know." Seth raised his voice, hoping someone would hear and get the hint.

The same clerk looked up and pushed her red frames higher on the bridge of her nose. "Sir, we have more people to serve than just you, all right? There are

plenty of folks waiting their turn just like you are. Sorry to tell you, you're *not* the only one looking to get money from the government."

Others behind Seth snickered, mocking him.

Seth scrunched his shoulders and hid behind the person in front of him, feeling his face heat up. He yanked his phone from his pocket to distract himself from the day whizzing by him in this line.

Instantly his frown turned into a smile, when he noticed Thaddeus had returned his message.

Me too. You wanna meet for dinner again tonight? My treat.

Seth nodded his head in agreement and returned the text.

Sure. After six?

Six o'clock since he'd need time to get home and change before Thaddeus picked him up for their date.

Chapter Two

Right after Thaddeus texted Seth, his mother called, urging him to come by. Thank goodness he still had time to stop by before his date; he didn't want to be late. One thing Thaddeus hated was being tardy for anything.

Once he secured his car, he jogged up the few stairs, flowers in hand, ready to give them to his mother. He grimaced, glancing at a couple of imperfections in the paint. Not only that, he heard creaks under his feet that sounded like the wood might need replacing. The small, white house he'd purchased for her a couple of years following his dad's passing seemed in need of some repairs. Thaddeus made a mental note to contact someone about fixing those issues.

"Mom?" Thaddeus opened the screen door and knocked as he entered, since he had his own key. "Mom, I'm here."

"Oh Thaddeus, I'm glad to see you." His mom Carolyn came in with her arms wide, puckering up for her son. Wearing a simple black dress with flat loafers, Carolyn still dressed as she had when attending his father's funeral five years ago.

"I'm really glad you came by. That older brother of yours can't even be bothered with his mother now that he's engaged to that *white* woman." She patted his shoulders.

Thaddeus sighed and hugged her back. "Um, Mom, I don't have long, but I came by as quick as I could. Did you want to talk about something important? Let me put these in water." Thaddeus scurried to the kitchen and grabbed a vase from the cabinet over the sink.

"I could've done that, baby. I know you've been working all day, so I wanted to invite you over for dinner. You know, to talk, just you and me."

Thaddeus shook his head, while he arranged the bouquet. "Can't Mom. I already have plans with um—uh... friends."

Silence.

Thaddeus finished quickly and walked into the living room to see his mother sitting on the couch wearing a huge frown. She petulantly crossed her arms over her chest. "So your *friends* are more important than your mother?"

"No, no, not at all, Mom." Thaddeus set the vase in the center of the coffee table and joined her on the flower-print sofa she'd brought from the old house.

As much as he begged her to buy new furniture, she refused, saying this sofa reminded her so much of his dad.

Yeah, old, broken-down, and stiff.

Thaddeus smirked at the thought and took both of her hands in his. He really did love his mom, but he was looking forward to spending time with Seth tonight, to try convincing him to go a little further. Besides, Lisa's insistence to talk about the hot book she'd read did nothing but make him antsy. Nothing worse than walking around with a huge hard-on in well-fitting trousers.

His mom didn't look convinced. She straightened her glasses. "Well, if it's not that then you have time to have dinner with your dear old mother. Your friends will always be here, I won't."

"Mom, don't say that." Thaddeus clicked his teeth and patted the back of her hands. How would he get out of the guilt trap his mom was laying down so nicely for him to step in? "It's just that, well—" He loosened his tie and looked away a quick second. He had to think of something fast, so she'd let him go. "The guys are supposed to be setting me up with someone, you know, a lady."

"Really?" Carolyn reached for Thaddeus and hugged him with all her might. When she released him, she clutched her chest and sighed. "Oh good! I worry about you sometimes, Thaddeus. You haven't even attempted to bring anyone around me. I thought you'd shock me by saying you're gay or something."

Oh boy.

He nervously laughed along with her and got up quickly from the sofa, unable to look her in the eyes.

What made her say that?

Thaddeus struggled with a reply to carry the lie on further. "I just haven't had time to date, and the guys are setting me up with someone. I'm a little tense about the whole thing, but—"

He heard her get up from the couch and, before he could get away, she rubbed his shoulders. "Oh Thaddeus, you'll be fine. As long as she's of our kind it won't be a problem with me."

He sighed inwardly and turned to his mother to ask her a poignant question. It really bugged him that his parents were so dead set against dating outside their race. "Mom, let me ask you; what is the big deal about dating a white... person, hmm? I mean, people are people."

The age lines on Carolyn's face seemed to increase, and she wrung her hands. "Yes, yes, but, why on earth would you want people to be giving you funny looks? Mixed-race couples are always frowned upon and if you have kids, they'll be picked on. You don't want the issues Spencer has, son. Really, you don't."

In disbelief, Thaddeus shook his head. "Is that the *only* reason, Mom? You're worried about what others will think?"

"No, I..." She shrugged and waddled back to the sofa to take a seat. "I've never really trusted white people, son. We come from a long line of slaves on the plantation. As far as I know, no one in our bloodline has ever married outside of our race because of that."

"Well that's just silly, Mother. I'm sorry. You're going to hold the past against people who have nothing to do with what happened two hundred years ago? Mom, that's absurd."

"Don't take that tone with me, Thaddeus," she snapped back and pointed at him with a scowl. "It is my right to hold any grudges I like. I'm an older woman, and I'm entitled to my beliefs. Your brother already disappointed me by bringing that... that *woman* into this house, and I don't want you to do the same."

Thaddeus turned his back on her and shoved his hands into his pockets. No way would this woman understand that he was gay and falling in love with a white man, but she'd have to deal with it...

A lot sooner than later.

He had every intention of telling his mother about Seth Gottlieb, the man of his dreams. Why? Because their relationship was more than just a passing thought. He wanted to be committed, married if possible; happily married, as a matter of fact.

And when he got the balls to tell his mother about his new lover-to-be, it would be a glorious day.

When the heck would that happen?

Not even Thaddeus knew the real answer.

Seth nearly tripped getting out of the shower to go answer his phone. He just knew Thaddeus was calling to tell him he was on his way, or worse,

downstairs waiting. He wiped his hands on the towel around his waist and exhaled. "Hello?"

"Hey, Seth, I wanted to call you and tell you I'm running a little behind schedule. My mom... yeah, we talked a little too long."

Seth released a sigh of relief and dried his hair. "No worries. In all honesty, I'm not ready to go anyway. I didn't even get called at the unemployment office until close to five. Then I missed my bus and train, so I'm just now getting dressed."

"Oh damn, Seth, I'm sorry. You should've called. I would've swung by and picked you up or something."

Seth shook his head and raked his wet locks with his fingers. "No, that's all right, Thaddeus. By the way, have you talked to your mom about us yet?"

Silence.

Seth knew he'd struck a chord with Thaddeus. If only he could tell Thaddeus's mom for him, since he already knew what to say.

"I..." Thaddeus seemed to struggle with the words.

"Never mind, I already know the answer. I'm not pushing you, believe me, because I know how hard it is."

"I know you're not, but I need to stop being such a wuss. It's just, well... heck, Seth, she's the woman who gave birth to me. If she's disappointed in me, it's kind of a big deal."

"I know, which is why I told you forget I even asked that. I just want you so bad, Thaddeus. I want us to move on with our lives, and you being in the closet kind of puts a damper on things."

More like a lot of a damper.

Seth rummaged through his old drawers, looking for boxer briefs. When he put his hand on a red pair, he tossed them on the bed. He continued, "Thaddeus, like I said, I'll be at your side no matter what, but I believe it's time you told your mom about the *real* you. I mean, aren't you tired of hiding?"

"Yes, but... well heck, she mentioned today how she was worried I might be gay, because I never bring any women around her. Damn it, Seth. I don't want to cause my mom to have a heart attack. I can deal with the other members of my family disowning me and even some of my old friends, but I only have *one* mother."

“And she should accept you no matter what.” Seth placed the phone down on the dresser and pushed the speaker phone button. “Hey, by the way, how far away are you?”

“Less than ten minutes.”

Seth’s eyes widened, and he pulled up his underwear. “Shit. Okay, let me finish getting dressed. We’ll talk more when you get here.”

Thaddeus laughed. “Well, you could stay naked, you know. I wouldn’t mind, not one bit.”

Seth joined him in the chuckle. “I’m sure, but then we’d miss dinner.”

Thaddeus harrumphed, “So.”

Seth bit his lip and closed his eyes a moment thinking about his ultimatum to keep Thaddeus out of his bed.

Shit.

What the hell was he thinking, keeping this man from riding him like a bucking bronco until the wee hours of the morning?

Seth slapped his forehead to snap out of the haze. “Well, I’m hungry. Let me get dressed. You really are a distraction.”

“Yes, I am. I’ll see you in a bit, Seth. Can’t wait to kiss your lips again.”

Seth nodded in agreement. “Same here, Sexy Man. Same here.”

Chapter Three

Thaddeus pressed the button on his steering wheel to disconnect the call, then made a right turn on Wabash Avenue, heading to Seth's apartment. His smile widened when he pulled into the lot and shut off the engine to wait for Seth to come downstairs to meet him.

I was worried. I thought you were gay or something.

His mom's words killed the little joy he'd had about seeing Seth. He still couldn't understand why that came out of her mouth. He worried if she'd noticed anything, or if anyone had seen him around with Seth and he knew nothing about it. In all honesty, Thaddeus hadn't been all that careful with the places he'd taken Seth. Like his favorite restaurant, Leola's, in Bronzeville and another small sports bar on the near north side called Jake's. Although he hadn't seen anyone, it didn't mean someone hadn't seen him and told his mom about the white guy Thaddeus was hanging out with.

Thaddeus sighed inwardly and shuddered at the thought of his mom finding out before he got a chance to break the news himself. It would be worse for her to find out from someone else about the man in his life.

"Hey Thaddeus."

Startled by the knocking on the window, he jumped and clutched his chest as he unlocked the doors. "Hey Seth."

Seth jumped in and closed the door. A wide, boyish grin and big blue eyes gleamed back at Thaddeus, making his heart skip a beat. "Hiya, babe. Missed ya. I'm really glad to see you." Seth reached over and hugged him tightly.

Thaddeus melted easily into Seth's arms. Seth was not a big man, in fact, he was smaller than Thaddeus, and that was just fine with him. Despite his size, Seth still had strength.

He had a medium build, standing about five-seven, with large hands and long fingers that Thaddeus couldn't wait to feel on every inch of his body. There was nothing feminine about him. Seth's olive skin, with his bushy eyebrows, dark hair with touches of grey, and narrow nose and lips, made him quite the catch. Thaddeus still couldn't believe his luck when the two of them met in a coffee shop two months ago. The scar he had, resulting from the

scalding coffee being spilled on him, still stung from time to time, but at least he'd always be reminded of Seth.

He'd never forget that day, running into the Starbucks only a block away from his building and literally bumping into Seth, causing him to spill his hot caramel latte all over Thaddeus's new suit. They'd caused quite a scene that day, but on the positive side, they made quite the connection from then on.

"Glad to see you too, Seth." Thaddeus held onto Seth's hand and brought it up to his lips. "I know you said you had a hard day, so I was thinking, why don't we have dinner at my place, hmm? I can whip up something really quick, and we can spend the evening relaxing by the fire." Thaddeus leaned in and dragged his fingers across Seth's face.

"I..." Seth hesitated. "Oh damn it, Thaddeus. You're tempting me to—"

"Yeah, and I'm hoping to win." And he was, thinking that their first time would give him more courage to tell his mom where to step off at.

He lightly kissed Seth's lips and traced them with the tip of his tongue. "Please, Seth. I know what you said, but honestly, I'm terrified about telling my mom what's going on."

Seth nodded and flashed a wry smile. "I know, but just think; you won't be hiding anything anymore. I mean, don't you think it's ridiculous for your workmates to know and not your family and childhood friends? I actually told my parents first, and I found that a lot easier than sharing it with my so-called buddies. Even though I knew I was risking getting thrown out or shunned by my folks, it scared me more to tell the guys. I just knew they'd beat me up or tease me and make me change schools."

"And did they?" Thaddeus asked almost immediately, since they hadn't talked in depth about coming out.

"No, they were actually really cool. They said stupid stuff like 'keep that gay shit over there', and they'd never heard of any gay Jewish boys, but it didn't matter. As long as they tolerated me, that was good enough. And hey, I know it's not gonna be easy, but I'm telling you, you'll feel a huge weight lifted off your shoulders when you finally tell them the truth."

Thaddeus exhaled, knowing neither would be an easy task, but Seth was right. It would be great to breathe again and not have to look over his shoulder. Besides, he was approaching his mid-thirties and shouldn't have to be sneaking

his man around town. He felt like he had been stealing from the cookie jar on top of the fridge and would get caught any moment.

He fondly recalled when he liked to take cookies before dinner and hide them from his mom, so he wouldn't get caught.

This, however, wouldn't be that easy.

Seth waited with baited breath for his lover to answer. No question, he understood Thaddeus's anxieties about revealing his orientation to his mom and friends, but it was past time they knew the truth.

"Sweetheart?" Seth gripped both of Thaddeus's hands in his and returned the peck on top of Thaddeus's thick lips. He wanted to do more than that, but it wouldn't be fun for them to get caught making out in the car behind his building. "Thaddeus?"

"Yeah, I know you're right, but can we?" Thaddeus's light brown eyes met Seth's gaze, pleading for him to do something more.

Seth couldn't resist. His body and libido screamed for him to give in. Yes, he'd handed down the ultimatum, but he desired to be in between the sheets with his man more than anything. "We can... yes... we... can." Seth pressed his mouth on top of Thaddeus's, and then pulled away as the jolt in his groin reminded him just how long it had been since he'd had sex. Even his mom recently asked him if he had been getting any, because he'd been so tense as of late.

Seth exhaled deeply and held onto Thaddeus's right hand. "You know I want you more than anything, right? That's why I'm renegeing on my deal with you."

Thaddeus cleared his throat and flashed a wicked smile, making Seth's groin tighten even more. He moistened his lips while backing out of the lot. "And I'm glad you are, Seth. Spending nights alone thinking about you just isn't good enough, you know? Jerking off in the shower only goes so far."

Seth squeezed Thaddeus's hand, causing his own to throb from the pressure. He turned his attention to the scenery outside to distract himself from the sexy man sitting in the driver's seat. "Believe you me, I know, babe. I really, *really* do."

Within moments, they'd left Seth's boring near south neighborhood for the sparkling views of the lakefront property Thaddeus lived in. Drab mid-level

buildings were quickly replaced by magnificent glass high rises, with abstract sculptures in the front yards and the museum campus in the background.

Although Seth had been to Thaddeus's place three times, each time the property took his breath away. Before they'd started dating, he'd only seen these buildings while leaving the downtown area after going to court to pay default parking tickets, or when he came down for the various summer festivals. He could only dream of living on the lake in such high-class condos as the ones spread out before him.

"All right, we're here." Thaddeus turned the key and unlocked the doors, allowing his valet to get in.

Seth quickly unclicked his seatbelt and followed, still in awe of his surroundings. When he noticed Thaddeus reaching for his hand, he quickly took it and let Thaddeus guide him inside the lobby.

"Wow." Seth felt like he entered a different world each time he visited Thaddeus's lakefront condo; the marble floors and high ceilings, with chandeliers dangling from them, were magnificent. Simple browns, grays, and whites colored the hallways leading to the elevators in The Maxwell building Thaddeus called home. A part of Seth hoped someday to call this place home as well.

"Seth, you okay? I swear you look starstruck every time you come in here." Thaddeus pushed the elevator lift with one hand while still gripping Seth's palm with the other.

Seth didn't want to act too much like a poor boy, but in truth, he loved Thaddeus's building. "I am. It looks like a freaking museum, Thaddeus."

"Well, it is majestic, and that's why I like it. Mom, Dad, and I used to come downtown when I was little, and I always said I wanted to live in a high rise. Now I do."

Seth watched the elevator go higher, looking at the small shops on the lower floors. "Yeah, you do. I don't even want to know how much it costs to live in this place."

Thaddeus leaned against the panel and yanked Seth over with him. "It's a pretty penny, but worth it all. The views, the security, it's all great. Most everyone is nice, too. I put my money down when I first heard about it going up four years ago. Giving up my lease on my other place, moving in with Mom for a year, and then waiting for them to get it done was hell." Thaddeus smoothed

the stray hairs from in front of Seth's face. "I love living here. I *really* do, Seth."

"Yeah, I'm sure you do, Thaddeus. It's a great place. By the way, instead of cooking, why don't we just order in?"

The bell rang and both men walked to the door. "I was going to suggest that, too. How did you know what I was thinking?" Thaddeus grinned and kissed the top of Seth's head gently.

"Well, we did just say how much we wanted to be together. Two months, Thaddeus. I don't wanna wait any longer."

Thaddeus led him down the carpeted walkway to his condominium, number thirty-five C. He slid his key into the lock and turned it slowly. "Neither do I, Seth." Thaddeus pulled Seth through and closed the door behind them. He took both of Seth's hands and held them above his head while engulfing Seth's lips with his own.

Seth groaned into his embrace, resting his arms on Thaddeus's broad shoulders. The heat between them caused his brain to turn to mush, and all he wanted was Thaddeus's strong hands roaming all over his body, today and forever. Never mind that Thaddeus hadn't come out just yet, all that mattered was what was happening between the two of them right now. An appreciation, a longing, a fire that burned inside of both of them, fueled something real to happen.

Seth sensed it in his gut, his soul. An emotion, more than just sex, a spiritual connection that reached way beyond their beliefs. And it choked him, taking his breath away, but he was more than willing to allow the feelings for Thaddeus to consume him.

"Thaddeus." Seth spoke once, his voice filled with need, breathy. He removed his jacket, giving it to Thaddeus who hung it on the knob nearest the front door.

"Seth—I want you... need you so much. I don't think I've ever wanted someone so bad in my life." Thaddeus gently caressed the side of Seth's face while shucking off his own suit jacket. He covered Seth's coat with his and began to loosen his tie as their mouths tangled in wild abandon.

"Thaddeus, oh damn, babe." Seth pulled away for a moment and yanked his shirt over his head, thankful he didn't wear a tie. Still he had Thaddeus's necktie to contend with, but it didn't bother him one bit.

To him, taking more clothes off Thaddeus was like opening gifts during Hanukkah as a child. He'd never had something as delicious as Thaddeus to unwrap, and he'd make sure to take his time doing it.

"Seth." Thaddeus pecked him again and led him to the spacious living room, surrounded by breathtaking panoramic views. A single black leather couch sat closest to the biggest window, while a matching La-Z-Boy chair and a loveseat were off to the sides. Thaddeus picked up a small remote and turned on low lights as well as the sound system that seemed to vibrate throughout the space. When satisfied, he tossed the remote on the small table and shifted Seth around until he was one with the sofa. "Not here... but... perhaps a little foreplay?" Thaddeus nuzzled the space under Seth's chin and made a trail to his Adam's apple.

Seth gulped hard, feeling his erection bulging out of his pants. His breath caught in his chest. "Yes... yes, but I need you right now; whatever you want, Thaddeus." He'd never been so intrigued by one person ever in his life until now. And he wouldn't regret giving in to Thaddeus either.

Dinner would likely become a late night snack or possibly even breakfast.

Thaddeus pulled Seth's shoes off, and then his socks, dropping them on the floor next to the couch. He pushed his own slacks down from his waist while Seth yanked the tie from his neck. Adrenaline raced through his veins as he yanked his own shirt away from his body, breaking nearly every button on his oxford.

I've got plenty more just like this.

"Wow, someone is almost as eager as I am."

"Almost?" Thaddeus glanced down at his cock straining against his boxer briefs and smiled at Seth. "I think *this* shows I'm more than *almost* into it, hmm?" He quickly removed Seth's pants and let them fall to the floor.

"Wow." Thaddeus admired the short, curly hairs on Seth's chest that covered a colorful tattoo, which appeared to be some kind of scythe starting at the top and carrying on down to his navel. The art intrigued him, but he'd wait until later to ask what it meant.

Wanting him, he spread Seth's legs apart, rubbing himself against Seth's crotch, creating friction and even more heat between them. Thaddeus threw his head back and grit his teeth, feeling the rush of wanting race through his body.

Damn he wanted this man something fierce, but he desired more than just sex. He wanted to make love all night. He could have sex with anyone. This was the man he was falling for, quickly. The one he was willing to risk losing his mom's love and friends' respect for. Seth wasn't some random man he'd just brought home from a long night out. They'd been seeing one another over eight weeks, exclusively, calling one another every day. To Thaddeus, Seth deserved more than a bang on the sofa.

"Thaddeus, I swear, if we don't do something about this now... huh?" Seth cocked an eyebrow and pointed to his own hard-on tenting his boxers.

"Yeah. I got'cha, babe." Thaddeus pulled Seth up and smacked his buttocks, pushing him into the bedroom across the way. Once they made it to his four-poster bed, Thaddeus lightly shoved Seth down on top. He darted to his dresser, getting the necessities before returning. Teasing his man, Thaddeus hovered over him, grinding his body against Seth's slender frame.

"Oh God, Thaddeus." Seth clutched his back and ran his hands down to Thaddeus's ass, grabbing his hips to pull him in closer.

Thaddeus loved when a man screamed for him. His only response was another kiss before running his tongue along Seth's throat until he reached his collarbone. While he enjoyed tasting Seth, Thaddeus slid his hands downward, tugging Seth's boxers from his waist. Just the sight of Seth's length embedded within small black curls made his mouth water, but he wanted to be inside Seth more than anything.

Saving that for later.

Thaddeus stroked Seth, rubbing pre-cum into his skin while pulling down his own boxers. "Want this, want you... so bad." Thaddeus kissed him again and again then grabbed the condom.

"Me too." While staring intensely at Thaddeus, Seth squeezed the lube onto his fingertips. He rubbed the slick substance over that spot, preparing himself for Thaddeus entry.

"Ready for me?" Thaddeus licked his lips and spread Seth's legs wide. He rubbed the head of his cock against Seth's tight space, while he nibbled on his earlobe.

"Oh shit, yes, Thaddeus. There, and don't be fucking gentle."

Thaddeus had to chuckle at Seth's dirty talk. "Such rude language for a nice little Jewish boy."

“I’m not that—nice...” Seth struggled to finish the sentence. He grimaced while gnashing his teeth and sat up on his elbows, wanting to watch. “Ohh...”

“Yeah, there.” Thaddeus slowly pushed in and retracted. He did it again until he’d hit the wall of Seth’s prostate. With each thrust, he felt as if he’d explode any moment. His breath caught in his chest, while his heart thumped a familiar rhythm. It had been so long since the last time, his body truly didn’t know how to react.

“Thaddeus, oh sh...” Seth gripped the back of his neck and clenched his buttocks to make a tighter fit. He nibbled on Thaddeus’s bottom lip, and sucked it into his own mouth.

“Fu... oh damn, Seth. I’m so—” Thaddeus clutched the sheets with one hand and held Seth with the other. Shots of adrenaline raced to his head, nipples, buttocks, and cock, causing him to lose all focus. Any minute now they’d be lost in the ecstasy of their climax. He desperately wanted Seth to come with him to make this first time extra special.

“Me too, Thaddeus. Please, yes, there.”

Thaddeus sped up the pace and leaned into Seth, until they were lying parallel to one another. With both arms on either side of Seth’s head, he continued to press into Seth, grimacing, trying to hold on until just when Seth was ready to explode.

Seth grabbed his chin and kissed him roughly while moaning into his mouth. Warm streams shot between them onto Seth’s stomach and Thaddeus’s midsection.

Thaddeus pushed hard once more and cried aloud as he shuddered uncontrollably. He accepted the kiss and returned it with more fervor and passion. He sucked in a breath as he filled the barrier between them, wishing there was nothing keeping him from feeling Seth’s tightness wrapped around him.

Someday.

“Thaddeus.” Seth exhaled and pulled him in again, thrusting his tongue deep inside Thaddeus’s mouth while he rubbed himself against Thaddeus’s crotch.

“Mhmm, Seth...” Thaddeus wanted to say he loved Seth, but he wondered if it was too soon to say the words. Besides, it had only been two months.

What if Seth wasn't ready for that next step?

Chapter Four

Morning seemed to come too soon, and Seth grimaced when the light from the window shone in his eye. “Fu... ugh.” When his joints protested his sudden movements, he was reminded about last night.

Oh yeah, last night.

Seth shrugged his shoulders, looking around for the man who made him so happy.

In more ways than one.

“Thaddeus? Babe, where are ya?”

A loud crash, sounding like pots and pans, came from the kitchen.

Seth’s eyes darted to the doorway. “You okay in there?”

“Yeah, Seth. Just whipping up a little breakfast, since you said you were hungry.”

“I did?”

“Well, your stomach was growling when we were hugged up together in bed, so I’m making you something. Something light but filling, so you won’t be too tired for round two.”

“Oh, of course I won’t.” Seth shook his head and leaned against the headboard, looking around Thaddeus’s bedroom; picturesque windows, mahogany armoire, along with matching side tables and dresser. Everything so simple, modern, and sleek, just like Thaddeus. Seth wondered if he’d decorated everything himself, or if he’d had a professional pick everything out. The man was so well put together. Hard to believe anything rattled him.

“Okay. Breakfast is served, my love.” Thaddeus stepped in carrying a tray with a single flower, plate, and a cup sitting atop.

When he came closer, Seth eyed the English muffins, watermelon, and oranges, along with the coffee. Yes, the coffee. Seth wanted that even more than the food. “Where’s yours?”

“Oh, I already nibbled a little while you were still sleeping. I don’t usually eat a morning meal, even on Saturdays.” Thaddeus sat the tray on the side table and got in bed next to Seth. He planted a kiss on his head and squeezed his

hands. "I really enjoyed last night, babe. Why don't you just stay through the weekend, and I'll take you home before I go to work Monday?"

Seth accepted the cup of java and sniffed the aroma of freshly ground coffee beans. "Sounds good to me. Hey, maybe we can catch a movie or something later on, hmm?"

Thaddeus dragged his long fingers down the center of Seth's chest. "Actually, I was hoping we'd stay in bed all weekend and explore each other's bodies. And, speaking of, what is this for?"

Seth's breath hitched at Thaddeus's touch. He face felt flush. "It was a dare. When I was a stupid freshman in college, we had a bet on a game, and I lost. I had to pick a tattoo that meant royalty, since the team I was betting on was the Kings." Seth laughed at his own admission and set the coffee down. Thaddeus handed him the plate of muffins. "It was just plain black, but I had some color added to the top and my father's name placed on it to signify how much I miss the King of Sarcasm."

"That's great that something bad turned out good for you. That would've been a bitch to have removed." Thaddeus planted a kiss on the bottom and licked the spot near Seth's navel.

"Mhmm, baby... you're gonna... wow." Seth stopped chewing the bread and closed his eyes a moment. Thaddeus's mouth set his whole body and soul afire. Just his kisses caused Seth's body to overheat. "Thadde... us..."

Thaddeus promptly stopped and flashed a wicked smile. His brown eyes nearly glowed in the sunlight.

Seth temporarily lost focus.

"Mhmm... finish eating Seth, so we can continue, okay? It's your turn to be on top."

"Oh yeah, I—"

Ring. Ring.

Both of them stopped upon hearing the phone ring and vibrate on the side table.

"Shii... I knew I should've turned it off. Let me see who this is. Don't move." Thaddeus kissed Seth quickly and got up from the bed. "Hello. Oh. Hi, Ma. Listen, now isn't a good time."

Seth grimaced and lifted another muffin to his mouth to make sure he was silent.

Damn right it wasn't a good time for Mother Dawson to call, but what could he really say? Seth eyed Thaddeus, knowing he was annoyed by his mother's sudden phone call at nine a.m. He hoped the phone call wouldn't be a long one, so they could get back to enjoying their Saturday morning alone.

"Mom, if everything's okay with you then I need to let you go. I..." Thaddeus ran his hand over his shaved head and down the back of his neck. He rolled his eyes and walked away from Seth, who looked so delectable in his bed eating his mini breakfast.

"One minute, okay?" Thaddeus mouthed to Seth so he wouldn't be distracted during the conversation with his mother.

Just what she could possibly feel to be so important at this hour was beyond him.

"Thaddeus, I won't keep you long, but I wanted to know how the date went last night. Is she what *I'm* hoping she is? You didn't pull a Spencer did you?"

"Hmph." Thaddeus shrugged and turned halfway to look at his man all tangled in the sheets on his bed. It was time to tell his mother about the man who made his heart sing and dance.

"No Mom, I didn't pull a Spencer, but I want you to meet..." Thaddeus said a silent prayer and exhaled, closing his eyes tightly.

Please God, let her understand.

"Him. It's a him, Mom, not a her."

Silence.

Seth looked up at Thaddeus with wide eyes and his mouth agape. "Thaddeus?"

Thaddeus inhaled again and wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead. "Mom, I'm gay. And actually, I *did* pull a Spencer. The man I'm falling in love with is white. Caucasian and Jewish, Mom. He's perfect for me, and I think if you give him a chance, you're gonna love him."

Still no word from the other end of the line, but he was relieved he didn't hear his mom drop the phone or, worse, hit the floor.

Seth flashed him a smile and got out of bed to stand right next to him. He grasped Thaddeus' hand and kissed it lightly.

"Thaddeus, so help me God, you did not just tell me you're gay. No you didn't, Thaddeus. You're not gonna disappoint me like that. No, no, no." He voice was full of disbelief. She started praying aloud through the receiver.

"Mom, please stop, okay? There's no need to pray for me. I'm falling in love with another man, and—"

"Oh my God, Thaddeus. What on earth has happened to both my boys? One runs off marrying a white woman and the other claims to be in love with a white man? Where did I go wrong, Lord? What did we do to have these boys act in this manner?"

"Mother, listen. I want you to meet him, and actually, I want Spencer to know too. Can we have dinner with you tomorrow night? It would mean a lot to me if you met him."

"Oh Lord, have mercy on me." Carolyn Dawson continued to pray. "No, no, Thaddeus, I cannot do this. I cannot accept a gay son, because I didn't raise one. You know your father is turning in his grave right now."

Thaddeus squeezed Seth's hand when he heard that last sentence. His mom was acting just as he had feared, but he wouldn't allow it to deter him from being with the man he'd come to love. He hoped eventually she would come around and accept him as he was.

"Then so be it, Momma. I am a good man, and that should be satisfying enough. If you won't love me as I am, that's on you." Thaddeus allowed Seth to lead him to his bed. His heart sunk hearing his mother's scathing words, but he truly felt free by admitting he was gay. "You raised me to be a respectful, hard-working, caring man. That's what I am."

"I raised you to be straight too," she added. "I said I didn't want a white *woman* in my house."

Thaddeus laughed nervously and shook his head. "Well, I followed that to a tee, right? I'm not bringing a white woman in your house, so—"

She interrupted him. "Thaddeus, have you lost your mind? This isn't a laughing matter. I won't tolerate any gay kids in my family. Being gay isn't right."

Seth caressed Thaddeus's leg and kissed his cheek.

“I’m not right in your eyes, Mom, but I’ll let God judge me when I meet him someday. Until then, I’m going to enjoy my life as a gay man. Good-bye.”

“Goodbye, Thaddeus. I can’t talk to you anymore until you get your life back on track. I’ll make sure to give your number to Pastor.”

“No, don—”

Click

Thaddeus shook his head and placed the handset on the bed. “Well, that went exactly how I thought it would.” He grabbed Seth and held him tightly. Part of him wanted to break down and cry, but part of him was overjoyed and relieved. He’d finally come out to his mother. He had finally told her what’d been on his mind for the past few years.

And even though his mother’s reaction disappointed him, he felt liberated; something he hadn’t felt in a long, long time.

“Thaddeus?” Seth let him go and held his face in the palms of his hands. He planted a light kiss on his lips. “I’m so proud of you, babe. You finally told her. I’m just sorry she didn’t accept you for the great man you are.”

Thaddeus nodded. “Well, her loss, right?” Thaddeus returned the kiss and grabbed Seth again in a tighter embrace. “As long as I have you in my life, everything will work itself out.”

Epilogue

“Damn, Thaddeus, I haven’t been to this place since you moved in. It sure looks great.” Thaddeus’s brother Spencer leaned against the counter and grabbed a glass of wine.

“Yeah, I bought furniture,” he smirked. “I can’t believe it’s been that long. I told you, you were welcome to stop by anytime, but you acted as if I took the same attitude as Mom, not welcoming you into the house with Brenda.”

Spencer shrugged and drank the contents of his glass. “I’m sorry about that, bro. I didn’t mean to stay away. I wish Brenda could’ve made it, but when I told her Mom might be here, she decided to stay at home. Now it seems like Mom won’t be here either.”

Thaddeus crossed his arms over his chest and sighed, “Yeah, well, you invited her, and she refused to come by. She hasn’t talked to me since I came out to her that day either. It’s cool though, because I couldn’t be happier right now. I live with the man I love, and his mom accepts us—”

“And so do Brenda and I.” Spencer grasped Thaddeus’s shoulder. “People need to start accepting others for who they are and not judge them. Being gay isn’t a big deal.”

Thaddeus faced him and returned the gesture. “I thank you for that, Spencer. Maybe one day our mother will come around, but I won’t hold my breath. I have to live my life for me, not anyone else. I’m a grown man, and I’ll just have to accept that my mother may never understand. That used to bother me, but since so much time has passed, I don’t worry about it anymore.”

“Thaddeus, it’s only been four months. She still has time.” Spencer patted his back.

“I know, but that’s a long time not to talk to your own flesh and blood.” Thaddeus nodded at his brother and walked to the oven to check on the lasagna he was making for dinner. “I’ve talked with some of my other friends, and they encouraged me to accept the worst just in case. I can handle the disappointment better that way.” He closed the door and turned the dial to off.

“Don’t lose hope on Momma, all right? She didn’t like Brenda at first, but after a while she just dealt with it.”

“She still doesn’t really accept her as part of the family though, Spencer. Even that last time we talked, all she mentioned was that *white* woman, not even calling her by name. Our momma still resents white people because of slavery. I mean, damn, that’s been centuries. How the heck do we move forward if we keep looking back at the past?”

“I agree, bro, but what can you do, huh? She’s an old woman set in her ways. I still hope she’ll see the good in you and Brenda.”

Thaddeus turned to look at Spencer. “I sure hope you’re right. Hey, don’t drink all the wine before my baby and his mom get back, okay? Seth says she loves Merlot, and I bought that especially for her.”

“Oh yeah?” Spencer laughed in response.

“Yep. Maybe I should’ve bought another bottle of it. I didn’t think you’d be hitting this one as hard.” Thaddeus added a chuckle when he glanced at the wine nearly half gone.

“Maybe you should’ve. I can run out and get some if you like.” Spencer spun on his heel, heading out of the kitchen.

“No, no, it’s cool. I’ll just ask Seth to do it. He’s already out, so...” Thaddeus plucked his phone from his pocket.

“Hey, honey, I’m home.” Seth called out from the other room.

Ah, too late.

“Where’s my handsome son-in-law?”

Thaddeus grimaced. “Ah well, maybe you should Spencer, since Seth is back home.”

“You got it, man.”

“Thanks.” Thaddeus followed his brother out of the kitchen and walked into Seth’s arms. “Hello, hon.” He kissed Seth lightly and broke away just before he could reciprocate.

Spencer and Seth shook hands and exchanged pleasantries.

“Hey Mom, how you feeling?”

“Wonderful, future son-in-law.” Seth’s mom, Diana Gottlieb, hugged Thaddeus tight. Standing only about five-foot-two in flats, Diana Gottlieb was even smaller than her son. Bright blue eyes, just like Seth’s, with flaming red

hair and glasses, the stout woman appeared to be in her fifties. “And who is this handsome fellow to your right?”

“Oh, that’s my brother, Spencer. Spencer, this is Seth’s mom, Diana.”

“Thaddeus you really have great genes. I bet your father was quite the catch.” Diana beamed and shook Spencer’s hand. “Are you gay, too?”

“Mom!” Seth shook his head and rubbed his mother’s shoulders.

Thaddeus stood back, taking in the scene. He was glad to see Seth’s mom and his brother talking.

If only my mother were here too.

He shrugged, sighing inwardly, wishing his mother would’ve changed her mind about coming, but then again, maybe it was for the best. Who knew what would’ve come out of Diana’s mouth, since she was so bold.

Spencer laughed, “No, Ma’am. My fiancée is at home. She couldn’t make it. Perhaps when we see each other again, you’ll meet her.”

Diana nodded in agreement and patted his hands. “That would be fine, my dear. And maybe Thaddeus’s mom could be here, too. That woman needs to get a grip and realize gay people are just people. We all bleed the same, damn it!” Diana adjusted her glasses and moved slowly towards the couch. “Seth, get me a glass of wine, will you? I really love that my boy found someone as wonderful as you, Thaddeus. If only you knew how many losers Seth’s dated in the past. Maybe you could convince him to go get a *real* job instead of working at the hardware store.” She rolled her eyes and lay comfortably against the cushions.

Thaddeus and Spencer laughed at that statement.

“Mom, I swear.” Seth nodded and took Thaddeus’s hands into his own. “Let me get her some. Hey, Spencer, where you going? And where’s Brenda?”

Spencer’s smile turned down, and he whispered, “She didn’t come because of... you know.”

Thaddeus grasped Seth’s fingers. “Go get Mom’s wine. Spencer is grabbing another, since he’s been hitting this one pretty hard.”

“Oh, okay.” Seth kissed him quickly and turned away.

“Seth, stop kissing your man and get me some wine! You can do all that after I’m gone!”

Spencer giggled behind him and headed out the door, putting on his jacket.

Thaddeus chuckled as well and closed the door, heading back into the living room to sit with Diana and chat. At least he had some kind of mother figure in his life, since his birth mom cut him out of hers, seemingly for good. Thaddeus tried to make amends, but with her latest refusal to come to dinner and sit with her sons and his new mother-in-law, their relationship might never be the same again.

Just before he sat down, a knock sounded at the door. “Okay, maybe Spencer forgot something. He probably wants money for the wine.” One true difference between the two of them... his brother was truly a tight wad. Thaddeus unlocked the door, and reached for his wallet. “Hey, if you wanted something—” He stared blankly at his mom standing there with Spencer behind her.

“Hello, Thaddeus.” She tightly clutched her purse.

“Mom, it’s good to see you. I’m glad you came by. Come in and have a seat.” Thaddeus waved her in.

Spencer followed. “She was at the security desk when I stepped off the elevator. I’ll go get that bottle...”

“No, no, please, I want you to stay, Spencer.” No telling what would happen when two strong-minded women like Carolyn Dawson and Diana Gottlieb got together. Thaddeus figured he might need some extra help, along with Seth, in case things got heated.

“Okay.”

“Mom, this is Diana Gottlieb, Seth’s mother.” Thaddeus held his breath, hoping she wouldn’t make any snide comments.

“Hello.” Carolyn held out her hand.

Diana took it. “Well hello there, Ms. Dawson. I’m sorry, I have trouble getting up from sitting. My bad back causes me such pain.” Diana patted the spot next to her. “Listen here, you and I have two great men for sons, and, it just so happens, the two of them want to be together. There’s nothing wrong with that, honey. There really isn’t.”

Oh boy.

Thaddeus glanced at his mom, waiting for a reaction. He saw Seth coming back into the room with a shocked look on his face.

“I...” Carolyn seemed to hesitate. “Well, in God’s eyes there is, but I love my son too much to turn my back on him and—” She wrung her hands and sighed. “If Seth makes him feel as good as... Brenda does my other son, I won’t stand in the way. I was blessed with two beautiful children, and I won’t turn them away, no matter what.”

Thaddeus smiled and released a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Mom.” He grabbed Seth’s hand and squeezed it tightly, gazing into his blue eyes. “This man really does make me feel special. We *truly* are meant to be.”

The End

Author Bio

Rawiya is the more sensual erotica writer in the BLRawiya duo. She loves multiracial characters who overcome obstacles other than race. Sweet, sassy, and spicy would be the best way to describe her work. Happily married mother of two, loves music, computers, and travel. She blogs regularly at [Wicked Sexy Writers](#). For more, please visit Rawiya's blog on Wordpress.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Blog](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Goodreads](#)

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MERIDIAN

By Gabbo de la Parra

Photo Description

Anime-style depiction of two men embracing at night. A brightly lit, futuristic city is their background, as if they stand on a hill. One man is tall and blond, and the other is shorter with dark hair. They seem to have come to this place on the shiny motorcycle beside them.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

In futuristic/apocalypse USA, most cities are led by the supernaturals. We, humans, become the second class citizen. New York's leader is a werewolf, Chicago is led by a warlock, and Los Angeles? Los Angeles belongs to vampires. Los Angeles human citizens are marked by numbers on their wrists, based on our blood type, and we must donate our blood on scheduled days for those vampires.

*This is where I live. I'm 18 years old, I'm blood type AB, and I dream of going out of this city. I hear that there is still a city where humans still have controls, where they are able to keep the supernaturals out. That is where I'm going—with this bad boy on a bike, whom everyone knows as "Tiger". I have a deep crush on him and well, on his bike (they both are just so sexy). Even if he annoys me by keep calling me "Bunny" (yes, I know I'm kinda lightweight). But heck, I'll survive this road trip and who knows, maybe I'll make him fall in love with me too *smile**

Notes:

*Please keep the nickname of "Tiger" and "Bunny" in the story—basically I want this to be a futuristic/road-trip story, where the two MCs are going from Los Angeles to their destination, a haven city for humans, and along the way they banter, they fight some bad supernatural beings who try to stop them from reaching the city, they talk about each other's lives and dreams, they discuss "classic" music (and by classic, you can make music from our time *lol*), they kiss, and they fall in love. It MUST NOT be sex heavy, in fact, sex could be kept near the end. Also, don't make it a D/s or master/slave or depressing story just because humans are second class citizens... I don't want to read humans are being used as slaves and suffered from their supernatural masters and such.*

Tags: futuristic, road-trip, light sex content, young adult-new adult.

Sincerely,

Ami

Story Info

Genre: alternate universe

Tags: fugitives, futuristic, road trip, sex industry, supernatural beings

Word Count: 18,786

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MERIDIAN

By Gabbo de la Parra

Prologue

Los Angeles. 2120

“Welcome, children of the San Pedro neighborhood. Today is a very special day. Your Assignment Day has finally arrived.”

Fourteen-year-old Kupra Lapin wasn't particularly excited about this day, or more accurately night, since all citizenship issues were conducted during the night, because the regents of the West Area were vampires.

The girl beside Kupra looked like she was about to receive the biggest ice cream cone her tiny mouth could devour. He didn't know any of the other kids around since his foster family had just moved to this area, and the school year wouldn't begin until next month.

“Okay, let's introduce the Assignment Board...” The vampire lady started saying names that didn't mean anything to Kupra. It wasn't like they would ask if he remembered any of this except for his final assignation. Each person named nodded boringly without even truly looking at them. “Well, now. The moment you've been waiting for. Your assignation determines your future within the West Area. Embrace it,” she said cheerfully.

Clearly wishing to be somewhere else, the members of the Assignment Board sat, as incandescent orbs emerged from an urn in the middle of the dais where they perched. One of these bored vampires must be really old, because Kupra had heard once that only really ancient vampires had magical powers of this kind, and there weren't that many of those here in America. They preferred the Old World. It could be just gossip though since he'd heard it back in the South Area.

Each luminous blob landed on a kid's outstretched hands. The one landing on Kupra's dissolved, and a little metal plate with a single word became visible.

COMPANION

It was the modern word for courtesan.

Chapter One

Los Angeles. 2125

DAY ONE

“You sure you wanna do this? Thirteen hundred miles ain’t gonna go easy on your tiny butt.”

“Listen, *Tiger*. I’m paying for this. How my butt fares the trip is none of your business.”

“Ain’t you a feisty little bunny?” *Tiger* pinched *K*’s cheek, using an annoying baby voice that was grossly at odds with his imposing frame.

K pushed *Tiger*’s hand away. “Would you stop that?”

“Alright.” *Tiger* put his hands up in surrender. “Where’s my gold?”

“I’ll give you your first half in our first stop for the night, when we are hours away from the city limits.”

Tiger arched an eyebrow. “You don’t trust me?”

“I don’t trust anybody. Don’t take it personal.”

“I ain’t the trustin’ kind either. I just wanna be sure you ain’t plannin’ on swindlin’ me.”

“You have got to be shitting me.” *K*’s laughter was full of sarcasm. “You’re the shady character here.”

“Moving people around ain’t nothing shady, *Bunny*. I’m ready to go, but you need to show me the gold first.” *Tiger* narrowed those weird, violet eyes of his. You didn’t see that color every day in Los Angeles. Lots of red eyes, but violet was seriously uncommon.

“Fine.” *K* pulled up his blue T-shirt, allowing *Tiger* to see the slim gold bars secure in the girdle-purse fastened around his waist. “Satisfied?”

“Yeah.” *Tiger* gave a crisp nod. “Hop on then.”

K let go of the hem of his tee, straightened his canvas jacket and adjusted his backpack. This was a two to three days tops trip to *Meridian*, where humans were not second-class citizens but owners of their destiny. After four years of

excruciating training and a year suffering the paws of male and female vampires having their way with him, it was enough. Many people would consider being a companion a glamorous job, but K hated it.

No amount of self-convincing would shake K's revulsion for the race of those drugged bloodsuckers that had killed his parents a few short months after moving to the city, even if the actual culprits had been convicted and eradicated. Ten-year-old K was left in the hands of a foster family thanks to the vampires' support system. Those strangers weren't bad people, but K had been old enough to remember his real parents and not become attached to those strangers.

The only good thing about his profession was that his rates afforded him his freedom quicker than other occupations would have. He was *sneaking* to freedom in the middle of his quote unquote vacation, but he wasn't going to argue semantics with himself.

Climbing onto the sexy-as-fuck bike, K wrapped his arms around Tiger's waist. He didn't know what was hotter, Tiger or his bike. He rested his head on Tiger's wide back as the bike growled to life. The man was warm, a wonderful contrast to the cold bodies of his vampire customers. Good thing his helmet would protect him from Tiger's long, blond hair whipping in the wind when they reached full speed on the road.

They zigzagged away from the park where they had agreed to meet without another word. Soon, they left behind the hundreds of ultratowers and those chivvying holoboards constantly advertising the wonders of living under the utopian Vampire Government.

Three hundred miles later, K's ass needed a break. Deep in Arizona, they stopped at a diner off the superhighway.

"You clear about our cover?"

"Yeah, we are on our honeymoon en route to Mega-Vegas."

"And?"

"We decided to drive to sightsee."

It wasn't common since the superhighway was essentially a free-for-all, but Tiger looked the part of road-warrior-husband perfectly. They were a pair of rough characters looking to add more adventure to their honeymoon.

"Perfect. Here, wear this." Tiger took two rings out of his pocket and put one on K's ring finger and the other on his own.

“This is so sudden.” K put the back of his hand over his forehead like someone overwhelmed by emotion. “Did we have a big wedding?”

“No,” said Tiger, narrowing his eyes and definitely trying not to laugh. “It was an intimate affair.”

“Shit. Can we eat now?” K wasn't going to tell Tiger his legs and his ass were killing him, so he faked boredom.

“Sure, Bunny.”

K had met Tiger the previous month when one of his customers had introduced them, joking that Tiger could take anyone and anything anywhere for a price. From the get-go, the rogue had called him “Bunny” in his sultry Southern drawl, which his vampire customer had found hilarious. They shared drinks until the vampire decided to take K to more private accommodations to use his services. They bumped into each other two days later, during a sunny afternoon, and sat to have a coffee.

Of course, what had piqued K's interest was the mention of Tiger's bike during their previous encounter, and he was glad to be able to see the masterpiece in bright daylight. A sleek monster, the *Owatatsumi* 2100 was a classic and a connoisseur's wet dream, and K knew about bikes as much as he knew about pleasure. Since K had already been contemplating an escape route, he took the chance, hoping the man was only loyal to profit, and asked Tiger how much it would cost to take him to Meridian.

When the four suprabeing groups (Vampires, Werewolves, Warlocks, and Fae) divided the United States among them, the 100th meridian became some sort of a limbo zone. Something about their common laws had reserved one thousand square miles radius out of all their jurisdictions, and humans, taking advantage of this esoteric technicality, had founded Meridian. One could think this should have caused a massive migration to this city, but not all humans were averse to live under supra-government; many thought it a blessing.

Luckily for K and Tiger's cover, the business people of Las Vegas decided to exchange one desert for another, and moved and expanded the city to an arid area of Kansas, almost in the middle of the country, where a lot more people could come and enjoy the new gambling mecca, which consequently fell under the jurisdiction of the North Area governed by warlocks and was ninety miles north of Meridian.

So, yeah, they were honeymooners on their way to Mega-Vegas if anyone asked. Technically, citizens were allowed to travel between Areas for short

periods of time, like for vacation or business purposes. Resettling was a different situation because it involved questioning and permits, especially in the West Area where citizens were basically food, even though they weren't called that but "contributors", as they were taxed in blood.

Transport from one Area to another was scarce and complicated to discourage wandering between them. That was why Transporters like Tiger existed. With so many obstacles, couples from different Areas were unusual, and this would make people wonder because they were going to see that K had the wrist numbers marking him as a citizen of the West Area, and Tiger didn't have any visible telltales of his area.

Tiger was from the South Area (the Fae region), the place from which K's real family had come. K never knew the reason his parents had moved to Vampire Los Angeles.

"You're seriously creepy when you're quiet like that." Tiger chuckled.

"I'm sorry." They had entered the diner, but it was his sore butt more than Tiger's words that had taken K out of his reverie.

"Not a problem, Bunny."

"You know, I have a name."

"Using a single letter is too badass for a little bunny like you."

"I'm big where it counts."

"Of course you are."

"Besides, companions can act as bodyguards for their clients, so you're aware I'm not defenseless."

"Never said you were."

"How yah doin', boys? What can I get yah?" The waitress was a wide woman with blue hair and hot pink spectacles. "I would recommend the lizard stew. It's finger lickin' yummy. I just had a spoonful myself."

"Ready for some desert delicatessen?" Tiger had a funny grin on his face.

"Oh." The waitress touched her ample chest. "I'm so sorry, love. I was looking at his wrist and didn't pay attention to yours. Thought you were both tourists. What's your type, love?"

In the West Area, everything revolved around blood type. Based on your blood type, you ate, exercised, and rested, everything to maximize your "happiness" *and* the wholesomeness of your blood.

“AB,” K said succinctly.

“Let me get you the list.” She punched several keys on her clipboard; a holographic menu emerged from the tabletop until it was floating at the perfect height for K to read it. “I’ll give you a minute to choose something.” She turned to Tiger. “You wanna tackle the lizard?”

“Bring it on.”

Chapter Two

If everything went as planned, in less than three days, Tiger would be dumping his first charge in Meridian, after he had avoided the human city like the fucking plague during all his fourteen years of “transporting.” He didn’t want to know or learn anything about that city, but Tiger had recognized the desperation Bunny’s eyes had been trying to conceal. That touched a part of him he didn’t know was still active in some recondite recess of his soul.

With Bunny deposited in Meridian, Tiger would go back to Mega-Vegas and find a nice piece of hairy ass in the gambling mecca thanks to his pocket full of gold. He’d fuck to his heart’s content before leaving all his transporting days behind to find a good place to settle and become a decent man. Heck, he was even contemplating falling in love with a big, hardworking dude and forming a family. He would be twenty-eight in September, but that wasn’t too old to get settled and have kids.

As part of his trade, living on the crazy roads of the US, he had dodged bullets, swords, claws, fangs, and the occasional burst of dark magic, thus a cozy shack with the same sweet piece of ass waiting for him every day sounded like paradise.

“What is that silly grin? You look nauseatingly foolish,” Bunny observed like a spoiled brat.

“Really? Is that the way to talk to the man who’s takin’ you to your *freedom*?” Tiger did air quotes.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. It’s not like you’re doing me a favor. I’m paying.”

“Maybe in your line of work the customer is always right, but in mine, if I don’t like the customer, I can kick his ass out of my way.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Behave like the nice little thing you are, Bunny, and we won’t have a problem.”

Bunny arched an eyebrow, and his blue eyes sparkled, almost in defiance, but he seemed to think better than to open his mouth to retort. Apparently, he decided on a more subtle approach. “Well, sweet husband of mine, tell me something I don’t know about you.” He put forward a winning smile and

grabbed Tiger's hand, probably because the waitress had come back to refill their drinks.

"Newlyweds? You two are the cutest thing. I'm pretty sure you had the most romantic first meeting."

"How did you know?" Bunny beamed at the woman, excited. Fucking companions knew how to fake it. "But Hubby here tells it better than me. If you have a minute I'm sure he'd indulge you."

"Darlin', I'm a sucker for a good story. The customers can wait." She waved her hand.

"Come on, love, tell the nice lady how we met."

He's so payin' for this later.

"Hmm, I know you're a busy woman, so I'll give you the short version." Tiger smiled. He knew how to fake it too.

"Huh-uh, darlin', don't spare me any details." She wagged her finger at Tiger.

Bunny's smugness deserved a smack. Tiger settled for a rough pat on the cheek. "Honey Bunny..."

"Oh my god." The waitress put her meaty hand over her mouth and squealed. "He calls cutie *'bunny!'*"

The only way to satisfy this nosy woman was to tell his own fantasy first encounter. He would have to change the big, burly man of his dreams for little Bunny, but how else was he going to get rid of this woman?

"Well, it had rained and there were puddles on the streets. My sweet Bunny was standing in a corner." *Yeah, I said you were in a corner*, he told Bunny with an arched eyebrow. "And I wasn't payin' attention and splashed him as I passed by on my bike. He ended up wet from head to toe and, of course, cursed me out, his little fist waving in the air, callin' me every name in the book."

"How adorable." The waitress clapped her hands, eating Tiger's every word.

"I turned around," Tiger continued, "ready to confront him, but he looked so angrily beautiful, I couldn't do anything else than offer to take him to his place to change clothes. I didn't mind his wet outfit as he held on tight, his lithe body pressed against mine. When we arrived at his place, I told him I'd wait to take

him out for an apology lunch. His wonderful blue eyes flashed, ready to refuse me, but I took his hand and kissed it and said, '*pretty please.*' Bunny narrowed his eyes but accepted. He made me wait, lady. I tell you. He left me there on the street for two hours."

She turned to Bunny and tsked.

"I was pissed," Bunny said, shrugging.

"But it was all worth it. He came down lookin' like an angel, all dressed in white, a vision from heaven. I took him to a restaurant by the sea where the afternoon ocean was pale in comparison to his eyes."

"How romantic," she sighed

Bunny's puzzled face should have been funny, but it wasn't. There was something odd in the way he was staring at Tiger, just shy of gaping in disbelief.

"When did you realize you loved him?" she asked Bunny, her long pink nails close to her mouth, about to be bitten.

"Shh, let me tell her that, Bunny, 'cause I know the exact moment you fell for me." Tiger pressed his finger over Bunny's surprisingly soft lips.

Bunny's eyes widened like satellite dishes.

"Lady, it was the first night we made love after months of furtive kisses and hesitant touches. When I was inside him, I looked into his eyes and told him that he was the most beautiful man in the world, with hair like a moonless night, skin like the rosy dawn, and eyes so blue I didn't need sky or ocean anymore in my life to be happy."

"Oh..." The big waitress fainted.

It wasn't a pretty sight, that much woman sprawled and unconscious between tables.

After a collective gasp, the other six or seven customers moved to see what was happening. A man even bigger than the waitress, with a filthy apron and a scowl the size of Texas, came wielding a giant cleaver that seemed like a kid's toy in his hand. "What's going on?"

"She was just talking to us one second, and the next she was on the floor." Bunny gave the cleaver-wielding cook his most angelic smile. Tiger was sure he had gotten out of more than one tight spot using those fucking dimples.

The hardened features softened, and the cook shrugged almost apologetically; his gaze moved from Bunny to Tiger and back to Bunny. “Well, I guess you were telling her your love story. She’s very excitable.”

“We were, and right before she passed out she said our food was on the house.”

The imp batted his lashes!

“Of course she did. That sounds just like her.” The cook grabbed the fallen waitress by her chubby arms and pulled, then stopped, letting her go. “Let me get her out of the way, and I’ll bring you some dessert.” He picked up her clipboard and checked something. “You’re type AB, just like me.” He had the stupidest, most wistful, smitten look on his face when he smiled at Bunny.

“What a lovely coincidence,” said Bunny, with the smile and the dimples and the lashes in full force.

Motherfuckin’ pretty Bunny.

Chapter Three

“You see? I’m not defenseless,” K said as they walked out of the diner.

“Pretty is not gonna get you out of a fight.”

“The trick is to know when to fight and when to charm.”

Tiger arched an eyebrow. “You sure you don’t have some fae in you? ’Em ears are awfully pointy for bein’ just human.”

K touched the tips of his ears and hissed, “Idiot.” He took a deep breath. “If I had fae in me, the vampires would not touch my blood.”

The sun was getting lower by the second. The mountains slowly melded with the sky.

“True.” Tiger put his hand over his brow like a visor. “I think we should find that Motel 69 the cook told us about and call it a day.”

“Afraid of riding at night?”

“You should know better than to say shit like that.” Tiger narrowed his eyes.

“I’m sorry, *Hubby*.”

Tiger gave him a once over, the semi-squint still in place. “Let’s get out of here.” He walked several paces toward the bike. He stopped and turned, offering his big hand to K. “Love?”

K was taken aback for a second, then remembered they were supposedly married and in love. He took the proffered hand. It was warm and calloused. Tiger pulled him in, and they ended up chest to chest, well, as much as their height difference permitted. Strong paws gripped K’s waist, and Tiger lowered his face toward him. K’s first instinct was to try to push Tiger away, but he relaxed; they were playing a part. Nevertheless, as Tiger’s mouth moved closer, something inside K very much wanted to learn the texture of those thin, dark lips.

The kiss landed on K’s forehead, and the hands moved upward, arms encircling him. The whole action seemed almost brotherly.

Shit. What was I thinking?

Now Tiger was towing him toward the bike, and K nearly tripped.

“Careful, my Bunny.” The three words felt like a caress.

They rode the four miles east (as the cook had instructed them) and found the structural nightmare that was a roadside Motel 69. Next to the svelte, tall buildings of Vampire Los Angeles, the squat, random design was anything but appealing.

After securing the bike in the parking lot, putting it in TON2 mode (so no one could move it), they entered the reception area.

“Ah, the honeymooners,” said the several-hundred-years-old-looking man behind the bulletproof glass desk booth. He was skinny and pale, and dressed like an unkempt teenager in a filthy hoodie boasting a million rock band insignias. In the old days, before vampire rule in this area, he would have been called an anemic.

Tiger and K looked at each other, puzzled.

Creepo waved a hand. “Oh, I’m not psychic. Caleb, the cook from the diner, vided to let me know you were heading this way. You’re paying with gold or credits?” He licked his lips and leered first at Tiger and then at K. “You two make a really fetching couple.” Creepo said the word *fetching* like a dog humping somebody’s leg.

“We’ll pay with credits.” K drew out his credit chip but wasn’t keen on putting it in the creep’s hand.

“I’ll take care of that, Bunny.” Tiger took the chip and, with his eyebrow hiked up and a menacing face, gave it to Creepo.

An ugly grimace emerged from the sunken face after the man read the credit info and personal details to make the charge. “Thank you, Mr. Lapin.”

Tiger pointed at K with his thumb. “*He* is Mister Lapin. I’m Tiger Jansen.” He unzipped his leather jacket and showed the tiger face tattooed prominently on his pectoral over his nipple, immediately visible because he wasn’t wearing anything else underneath the jacket. The six pack was a nice sight too.

Shocked, Creepo and K swallowed hard in unison.

“It’s a pleasure, Mr. Jansen.” The night clerk made that strangled, humping dog noise again.

“I’m sure it is.” Tiger yanked the chip from the gnarly fingers. “Room number?”

“Room 69. Honeymoon Suite.”

“*Of course.* Thank you.” A firm grip of Tiger’s hand over K’s upper arm accompanied the thanking. He hauled K out of the reception, hissing, “Fuckin’ ugly-ass zombie.”

“There’s no such thing as zombies.” K chuckled as they walked, looking at room numbers.

“If there were, that thing would be one,” Tiger growled.

“But instead of brains, he’d be eating cocks and butts...”

Tiger’s grip on his arm loosened, and he laughed, truly laughed. It was a very nice sound, the first time K had heard it, too.

“You’re funny, little Bunny.”

K shrugged, smiling.

They found the Honeymoon Suite and used the credit chip to open the door. It was pretty decent and clean. K had been expecting something that looked like the clerk.

Tiger plopped on the huge bed and patted the spot beside him. “The bed’s good, come.”

Throwing his backpack near the bed, K launched himself into it and landed beside Tiger. “Really comfy.”

“You know we gonna have to make at least some lovemakin’ noises.” Tiger wagged his eyebrows. “That zombie’s surely gonna be listenin’ through them damn walls.”

Very strict regulations prohibited anything beyond thermal recognition within hotel rooms and the likes. And it was a heat signature that could only be read by enforcement agencies in case of anomalies like murder or kidnapping. K still looked around the room for cameras. “Yeah, I guess we’re going to have to simulate something.” He stretched his body and activated the holo-remote for the wall screen facing the bed. It moved from the electronic headboard to K’s palm. “Let’s watch a movie first, and then I can simulate-fuck you.”

“Excuse me?” Tiger arched his almost invisible eyebrow. “When people see us, they see me fucking you, not the other way around.”

“Pfft, and you were supposed to be the man to go against all conventions, a rebel, an *edgy* badass.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That if we were in a real relationship, I’d be the one doing the fucking.”

“Alright, let’s settle for taking turns. Is that good enough for you in this fake relationship?”

“It’s certainly a start.”

“So I’ll be the one doing the fake riding tonight?”

“Movie first, baby.”

Tiger rolled his eyes, and K stifled a chuckle.

This was definitely going to be a lot of fun.

Chapter Four

DAY TWO

Tiger woke up with a start.

He didn't know how he felt about the lovemaking simulation the previous night, especially since Bunny got hard under him. The little bunny had a very nice, thick piece that fitted perfectly between Tiger's ass cheeks. Thankfully for him, they had decided to keep their underwear on. An even better thing had been the fact that Tiger was wearing underwear at all.

What wasn't propitious was his own cock revisiting last night's hardness. It didn't seem like a case of morning wood but one of unattended need. Tiger closed his eyes and sighed. That brought the image of Bunny under him, his long, slender arms covered in tribal tattoos that were sexy as fuck. He was a lot younger than Tiger and with a slim body, but he was all man, and as much as Tiger preferred burly, hairy men, there was something about Bunny that was disturbingly appealing.

“Good morning.”

Bunny's husky morning voice made Tiger's cock perk. Tiger opened his eyes and turned his head. Bunny was looking at the ceiling and breathing softly. Tiger felt the urgent need to comb that disheveled moonless hair.

Sweet Fanaqua, I didn't just think that cheesy shit.

“Good morning to you,” Tiger said, hoisting his body up and turning around to face Bunny more appropriately. “Did you rest?”

“I feel rested.”

More husky voice.

More cock throbbing.

Tiger needed to find a distraction before Bunny noticed his stiffy and became offended. Well, there was no real reason for a companion to be offended by a hard cock, but... since Tiger wasn't a customer it could be construed as crossing the line, right? Their marriage was a pretense after all.

“You want some breakfast?” Yeah, Tiger just needed to get out of the room to save face.

Bunny moved his eyes from the ceiling toward him and scrunched his nose. "Not yet."

Oh fuck.

Those sexy tattooed arms came out from under the covers and pushed Bunny up. He sat, resting his back on the headboard. His nipples were pointy pebbles.

Alright wrong place, up—look at his face.

"Did you rest? You look a little flushed." Bunny blinked and smiled, and he seemed fully awake after that.

Tiger moved to a sitting position too and answered, looking at anything but Bunny. "I'm good."

"I'm glad. Can we stay in bed for a bit and have a nice chat?"

"With morning breath?"

Really, Tiger, morning breath?

Bunny chuckled, and the rough murmur went straight to Tiger's balls, caressing and rolling them like young, nimble fingers. Bunny took a glass of water from the nightstand on his side. "Here, swish and swallow." He offered the glass to Tiger.

That is just wrong.

"Not the kind of thing I should be swallowing," Tiger said before his tongue connected with his brain.

"I'm pretty sure you have swallowed worse things than breath water."

"Damn right you are." Tiger swished and swallowed. He noticed Bunny looking at his throat with a funny expression on his face. It wasn't exactly a grin.

Tiger needed something that would take them both away from their bodies and into a more focused area. "So... why do you wanna escape the West Area again? 'Cause I've been in all the Areas, and Vampire region is by far the best. You don't see homeless people. Nobody is poor if they wanna work. All have good health benefits. I mean, it's the American Dream come true."

"I have my reasons." Bunny's face darkened.

Yes!

“Obviously. I’m just intrigued. As a companion you make good money...”

“Can we talk about something else?”

“Sure. What’s your favorite color?”

“Yellow.”

“Like yolk?”

Bunny sighed. “No, moron, like the sun.”

“Damn, you really hate vamps.”

Stretching his body toward the floor, Bunny brought up his backpack; he rummaged through it and drew out a folded sheet of paper. The only people who used paper were preschool kids. He gave it to Tiger.

“What is this?”

“Would you just open it?”

Tiger unfolded it. It was a child’s drawing. Three stick people, what Tiger assumed was a mother, a father, and a son, but the most relevant thing in the composition was an enormous yellow sun in the background, occupying almost half the page.

“I loved the sun long before I had to live most of my life in the night.” Bunny’s expression was hard and serious. Tiger really preferred the fake, lovey-dovey husband.

“Okay... Let’s talk about music then.”

“Woodkid’s ‘Run Boy Run.’”

That smile was definitely better.

“Sweet Fanaqua, that old crap!” Tiger chuckled amused. He’d thought the kid would like things from this century.

“What? I could go way more retro with something from Madonna’s First Life, like ‘She’s Not Me’!”

“Is that sarcasm I hear in your Bunny voice? ’Cause everything Madonna is a classic.”

“You understand that the whole concept of classic involves the singer or composer being long dead? That old bat found herself a vampire to turn her, and she still sings!”

“That’s why that period is called First Life!”

“I thought we were going to talk about music, not argue about it...”

“You’re right, Bunny. I like Woodkid’s ‘Iron’ a lot.”

And in those songs’ old videos, people were escaping from something too, just like Bunny.

“So... Tiger can’t be your real name.”

“My name’s Themistocles Jansen.”

Bunny snorted. “That *is not* a badass name.”

“The original Themistocles was a badass Greek general.”

“I know that. I saw the movie, and the remake, and the remake of the remake. Still, it’s not a fearsome name.” Bunny’s grin was actually beautiful, but also seriously annoying.

“That’s why I go by Tiger, Bunny.”

“Themistocles is a mouthful anyway.”

“I’m a mouthful. Everywhere.”

His client seemed uncomfortable beside him for a nanosecond. “I think it’s time we get dressed and head out.”

“Sure.” But far from diminishing, his hard-on stayed quite strong, perhaps waiting for a release that would not come from the man running for the bathroom hills.

Chapter Five

When K came out of the bathroom, Tiger was sitting on the bed waiting for him with a pair of wine-colored pants and a black T-shirt folded beside him. He must have gone to get them out of the bike while K showered. The tee would help with the idea of K holding onto Tiger with nothing under his leather jacket. Yesterday he hadn't had this info, and today it would have been pure torture. K was a sucker for sexy abs, and abs plus bike plus long, blond hair wasn't helping in deflecting the turbulent, unresolved equation Tiger was becoming in K's head.

K channel surfed to keep his mind from wandering to Tiger lathering all that naked body in the shower. He found the most violent movie available and concentrated on all the gory details like never before in his life. Still, his wayward memory kept bringing up the way Tiger's hips had felt under his hands, the way the man rocked and undulated over him, and the disturbingly hot sounds he'd made during their fake lovemaking. His cock responded in the same way it had last night, engorging and hardening. Shit. No amount of beheading and explosions could drive K's mind away from the ghost of Tiger's weight on top of him.

Since the massacres on the screen weren't helping, K started fiddling with the panel on the headboard. He remembered all these establishments had satisfaction surveys, although theirs wasn't blinking. He activated it, and an ethereal female voice said, "Completed." Tiger had filled out even K's—how rude! The review option came up and K accepted it. The female voice started asking question about their satisfaction, but instead of short, logical answers, all were utter nonsense like: Mattress too plump—needs to be harder, taking my Bunny to Mega-Vegas to honeymoon the fuck out of my sick days at work, the walls could use more purple (they were soft blue), you should have complimentary baskets of fruits and vegetables peppered with dildoes.

By the time Tiger came out of the bathroom, K was laughing so hard his eyes were painfully wet.

"That's the reaction I was hoping for," Tiger said, fully dressed.

"Good thing they don't charge for this."

"You give stupid answers to stupid questions." Tiger set his dirty clothes from yesterday on the bed and folded them neatly one by one. "Hungry now?"

“Absolutely.”

“If we have a good breakfast now and do stretch stops every two hours, we will have crossed New Mexico by the end of the day to settle for the night near the state line with Texas. With an early start tomorrow we could be in Meridian by noon.”

“Sounds great.”

“Let’s get some food then.” Tiger stopped and gave K an appreciative glance before picking up K’s backpack. “I see you’re wearing yellow, like the sun.”

K nodded. “Like the sun.”

With their bellies full, they said goodbye to a really nice-looking girl at the front desk. Her name tag said “Adara,” and she had an *Early Morning Oldies But Goodies* music video blaring out on the giant screen behind her; K hadn’t noticed it the night before since he was so crept out by Creepo the night clerk. “There’s something really hot about that video of Dollar Sign Kesha,” K commented as they walked toward the bike.

“What, the killing of the unicorns or James Van Der Beek?” Tiger’s tone was a mix between amusement and annoyance.

“All I’m going to say is that I am against the murder of mythical creatures...”

“That’s what I thought.”

“You do look a bit like Van Der *Douche*,” K snickered, hoping that Tiger remembered that Dollar Sign Kesha called Van Der Beek *that* in the video.

“Oh, shut up and get your ass on that bike.”

They quickly rode out of Arizona. Following their two-hour-drive-and-stretch-stops plan, the day went by pretty fast. They spoke about music, movies and fashion in the shade of food chains sprouting from truck stops like desert flowers. Here K learned that Tiger was a Vine as they played Ogham Wars with a deck of cards they found abandoned on a table at one of their stops. Although they were born nine years apart, their birthdate equations (Tiger’s $09-17-2097 = 35 = 3+5 = 8$ and K’s $01-07-2106 = 17 = 1+7 = 8$) had them both starting the game with the same number of cards. Luckily for K, he was Birch, and thus was first to go. They had so much fun with it they kept the game going for several stops.

It always amazed K how things in human nature often returned to their roots, such as people dismissing that Sagittarius, Leo, Scorpio zodiac somewhere during the 2050s and embracing the Celtic Tree instead. This also made K aware of the fact that Birch and Vine were extremely compatible and complemented each other well.

Before K could dwell too much on this silly knowledge, the sun was ready to kiss the New Mexico hills. Soon they found a place that was a hybrid between a motel and a biker bar. The holoboard over the entrance had a giant cat, one leg in the air, giving itself a bath. Below, neon letters flashed the name of the establishment with relish: L. Minora's. K had to wonder if that L was for "labia."

The interior brought to mind a saloon from a Wild West movie—the only thing missing was the jolly pianist; instead, twenty-first century acid rock blared, unconcerned. They decided to stay around the brutish clientele and enjoy the raucous, unruly atmosphere before turning in. Werewolves, Fae, Vampires, and Warlocks mingled easily with humans in this sort of rough environment. It was freeing to be away from the intricacies of upscale vampire culture, and they had armed themselves after assessing the clientele of the locale. Fish and chips (*forget* eating for his blood type), jars of beer, games of pool and Texas Hold 'Em made the hours seem like minutes.

The rogues had embraced their cover and were surprisingly respectful until Tiger said, "I think it's time to go to bed, Bunny." Then it all was catcalls and lewd remarks. They waved their good-byes and moved toward the stairs to go to their room.

K's pleasant buzz evaporated instantly as they encountered a bloodsucker blocking their path.

"What a delicious surprise to find you here, K." Amusement laced the vampire's tone. He was K's most persistent customer. He had even offered to turn K, which was equal to a marriage proposal, giving K a better status within their society. An option K wouldn't contemplate even in the face of brutal annihilation.

"Marcus. You are far from the comforts of Los Angeles." K's voice was casual, but he felt Tiger tense behind him.

"You looked ravishing in that vid-response you left telling your clients you were on vacation. I just wanted to check if you were having fun without me."

He browsed the noisy place with predatory eyes and a disgusted grimace on his handsome but cruel face. "Not the place I'd have expected to find you in."

"Sometimes a boy needs a change of scenery." K tried to move past Marcus. "It was nice to see you."

Fuck, the vampires weren't supposed to notice he was gone until his scheduled tax-payment next month, when it would be too late for them to care about it. They got pissed off when people fled, but the runaways didn't become "most wanted", at least not visibly.

"Not so fast." Marcus grabbed K's upper arm, pulling him toward the cold body. "Who is this man taking you upstairs?" he hissed in K's ear, and K was sure he had done it looking at Tiger with disdain.

"I'm his fuckin' husband. We havin' a problem, vamp?"

"We do now." Fangs clicked, and K was launched toward the top of the stairs, landing on his ass, blinding pain paralyzing him for a moment.

By the time K was able to sit and focus on what was happening, Tiger and Marcus were fighting in a clearing in the middle of the barroom. In any other circumstances the fight would have become a massive bar brawl, but now the general consensus was one of astonishment, as Tiger was giving Marcus hell, matching his strength and inhuman speed. Punches, kicks, and head-butts were almost a blur; every time Marcus tried to sink his fangs in, Tiger did a counterattack and avoided the punctures. They disentangled for a moment as Tiger pushed Marcus away from him with a well-aimed kick in the stomach, and a warlock (who had been playing pool with them) thrust a sword into Tiger's hand.

In a swift move that was both beautifully hypnotic and terrifying, Tiger severed Marcus's head. It flew across the room to land on a broken table two seconds before both separated body parts exploded with a wet bang.

Then the bar brawl did begin because the other vampires in the bar tried to jump Tiger all at once, and every other suprabeing took Tiger and K's side. Crashes, screams, and growls surged as bottles were broken, chairs flew, and limbs were hurt. And because they were in L. Minora's, cats' yowls and screeches were an essential part of the cacophony.

K ran down the stairs to join the fracas, pulling out the gun he had tucked in the small of his back. A hand grabbed his wrist and hauled him toward the

doors. Somehow Tiger had managed to get away from the turmoil and was towing him out of the bar.

“I guess we ain’t stayin’ here tonight,” Tiger said almost laughing as they jumped onto the bike. “We’re gonna be in Meridian a lot sooner than we expected.”

They were not a pair of newlyweds on their way to Mega-Vegas anymore. Now, they were fugitives.

Chapter Six

That vampire asshole wasn't the first bloodsucker Tiger had killed, but it was the first time before so many witnesses. Even though he had dispatched the motherfucker in self-defense, there was no chance in hell a Vampire Council would acquit him. If this had happened in any other area he might have had a chance.

Alright, not the time to think about what could have been. Shit happened.

It was weird, but Bunny's weight on his back strangely soothed him. Tiger had seen the resolution in those pixie features when Bunny flew down the stairs ready to join the fight. He didn't have to do that. He could have easily gotten out, jumped on the bike and escaped to his freedom.

Self-preservation was the natural instinct of any human. This was why Tiger preferred to be around the wolves; they had a sense of community, of family, of loyalty to each other. He really didn't know what to make of Bunny's actions. Now his charge was squeezing him so hard it might have been painful if the kid was a bigger man.

They had been riding for at least an hour. Tiger brought the bike to a stop.

"Why are we stopping? Are you all right?"

Bunny's concern was simply adorable.

"Are you hurt?" Bunny asked again, getting off the bike. Bunny grabbed Tiger as he dismounted and turned him around, perhaps searching for some kind of injury. His young face was lightly illuminated by the waning moon, worry marring those almost angelic features.

"Slow down. I'm fine." Tiger grabbed Bunny's wrists. The hands immediately closed into fists.

Concern turned into fury in those bright eyes. "You scared the fuck out of me."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I thought you couldn't drive anymore. I don't know." Bunny unclenched his fists and rested his open hands over Tiger's chest. "For a minute there I saw you dying, and I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to save you."

Years of knowing how to disguise his emotions helped Tiger not to grin; not because he thought Bunny incapable of helping him but for the simple fact that he'd wanted to help Tiger. "Thank you." He kissed Bunny's bunched brow. "But I didn't give you that gun to help me. It was to protect yourself."

"I was not going to let those bloodsuckers kill you." As Tiger's grip lessened, Bunny freed one of his hands and punched Tiger in the stomach. "Why the fuck didn't you use *your* weapon?"

"Ouch." Tiger snickered. He rubbed the spot where Bunny had connected. It was a good punch. "Firearms don't work on vampires, you know that."

"It would have slowed him down!"

"Did I look like I needed to slow him down?"

Bunny blanched for a moment. "No." Then his blue eyes narrowed, full of suspicion. "How did you do that? Are you part supra?"

"Nah."

"What you did was humanly impossible."

"Not when you know the right techniques. It's ancient knowledge. You don't think all the supras just appeared one night and conquered the USA, right? They have been around for eons, and humans have been learnin' how to fight 'em since the dawn of time."

A snort.

"What?"

"Such a good thing, that ancient knowledge, since it didn't stop the supras from controlling the country."

Tiger grinned widely. "If everybody could learn this then it wouldn't be secret and sacred, don't you think?"

Bunny rolled his eyes. "You never said *secret and sacred*."

"All ancient knowledge is sacred." Tiger caressed Bunny's cheek. "Technology has made us humans lazy and comfortable. The supras just waited for the right time to emerge knowing that the majority of the population would simply accept their ruling as a fact, and not bother to fight it after the chaos the country had been waddling through before their takeover. Many have embraced it wholeheartedly."

It was a messed-up reality, but it was the one they were stuck with.

“Can I learn to do that?” Bunny’s hands moved to grasp Tiger’s lapels.

“It takes years.” Something caught in Tiger’s throat. “Besides, you’re about to live in Meridian, away from the supras. You don’t need to learn these things.”

“What if someday they decide to take Meridian from the humans?”

“They can’t do that. Their own laws prevent it.”

“Laws can be changed.”

“The changeable laws are human laws. Supras are bonded by things that are stronger and deeper than human understanding. The 100th meridian is, for some reason, sacred to them. That area is untouchable. The only downfall of that city will be by human hands.”

“We could go to Europe. They don’t have that much power there.”

We?

The thing in Tiger’s throat plummeted to his chest. Tiger pulled Bunny toward that thing that confused him, making the boy’s head rest over it. He smoothed Bunny’s hair. “You’ll be fine in Meridian. You will *not* need to run anymore.”

Tiger would take Bunny to Meridian, collect his money and seek the werewolves. He would find a nice wolfman and settle. The vampires could not touch him in the East Area.

Bunny’s arms encircled Tiger’s waist and squeezed him harder than when they were driving.

The action was worse than a thousand pleas.

And the idea of that unknown, burly werewolf in Tiger’s future started to dissolve.

Chapter Seven

DAY THREE

They had been riding for hours, and the road appeared endless. A faint glow was emerging from the east signaling the end of vampire time. This didn't exactly make them safe since the vampires had human enforcers who did their dirty work during daylight hours.

Suddenly, a wall of briars erupted from the superhighway, blocking their path.

Even with the howl of the wind and the roar of the bike and the muffling of his helmet, K heard Tiger's "Shit!" They skidded to a halt two feet before the painful-looking thorns, the bike almost toppling in the aftermath. Tiger took off his helmet and chucked it violently to the pavement. "What in the fucked fuck?!"

K dismounted, removing his helmet more quietly. "Magic?"

"Of course it is."

A horse neighing made them look the other way. One rider and four figures on foot advanced toward them in that strange fashion of the supras that was a mockery between speed and slow motion. Some people called it shimmering movement.

"What do we do now?" K asked, putting the bike between them and the supras. It was a shame they didn't have bigger weapons. A rocket launcher would be pretty handy now.

"By the way they move, we know they ain't no vampire enforcers. And they don't trust other supras to do their biddin'. We wait to see what they want."

Tiger pushed K behind him, covering him with his bigger body, but putting him dangerously close to the thorns blocking their escape route.

The supras were lean, all dressed like rejects from a punk band, except the one on the horse; that nut was wearing a Viking helmet and more furs than a werewolf orgy. If witches flew broomsticks, this idiot should be flying an oar. He was the most ridiculous warlock K had ever seen.

A blond, svelte... man? Yes, he was a man (there was a nice package between his legs), with an owl on his left shoulder moved toward them. "Well,

well, well. What have we here? Is that you Themistocles Jansen?" His voice was like a deep lullaby, the voice of a caring father singing to you before you fell asleep. It was unnerving.

"Deixis? You son of a fae bitch! What you doin' so far from New Orleans?" But as much as Tiger's tone was jovial and even excited, he didn't move from their spot behind the bike.

"You know, making a living with some friends, doing this and that."

"The owl's new." Tiger kept his weapon out of their line of sight and cocked.

"Are we gonna wait till the sun is fully up to get them?" The heavily tattooed, almost rawboned man had the guttural, cavernous voice of the werewolves. His hair was shaved on the sides, and what should have been a Mohawk was fashioned in a long braid that rested along his shoulder like a bored snake.

"What are we, fucking vamps that need to be running away from the sun?" The other werewolf elbowed the first, the long curtain of his coffee hair jostling with the move. Lank and regal, this one looked like a Navajo prince.

The tattooed one growled, but then blew a kiss to the prince. "Shut up."

"Get us? What's goin' on, Deixis?" Tiger didn't move an inch.

The fae grimaced. "You see, Themistocles, we heard through the grapevine about some fugitives, and we just wanted to be helpful citizens of Vampland."

"Helpful my ass," growled K. "None of you are vampires or citizens of the West Area."

"So, cutie speaks." Deixis stroked his owl.

"Gentlemen," the second warlock, wearing a jarring, flowered long-sleeved shirt, and floating like half a foot over the pavement on a blue cloud, called their attention. "The best course of action here is to listen to their story and then make our own conclusions. It is one thing to profit, but another to act like vamps' minions."

"Abattoir is right," the Viking impersonator offered. K should be more lenient; the fur hoarder was helping to give them a chance.

"Thank you, Gaol," the cloud rider said. "Let me take care of that monstrous bike." He chanted quickly, and Tiger's bike started to shrink until it was the size of a gun. "You can put it in your pocket now."

“Motherfucker,” said Tiger under his breath, keeping K behind him.

Deixis waved his right hand, and the briar wall evaporated in a purple mist. “Guess we’re taking them to Ami.”

“Hold on. There’s something fishy about these two.” The tattooed werewolf advanced toward them. He put his hand behind him like someone drawing a gun from their waist band.

Tiger aimed his gun at the werewolf’s heart. “Stay right there, mutt.”

Abbattoir floated gracefully and touched the werewolf’s arm. “What are you doing, Tats?”

“Something’s not right. I don’t think they are humans,” Tats growled. He pulled what he was keeping hidden. It was a reader.

The long-haired werewolf came and sniffed them. “They smell right to me.” He licked Tiger’s cheek. “Although there’s something flowery about this one that’s weird.”

“Stop that, you dog.” Tiger moved his arm to punch the werewolf.

K held it down. “We are outnumbered,” he whispered.

“I don’t care.” Tiger cleaned his cheek with a rough swipe.

Tats moved the reader around Tiger. His eyes narrowing with each inch inspected. Then he did the same operation with K. Here his face was one of confusion more than suspicion. He walked backward, regrouping with the supras and pulling Abbattoir and the other wolf with him. “The tall fucker is fae, and you knew that.” Tats was in Deixis’s face.

“I ain’t no fucking fae, you stupid-ass runt.” Tiger pulled K possessively to his side. “Bunny is the one with them pointy ears.”

“Hey,” K punched Tiger in the side. He waved his wrist for all to see. “Vampires have been taxing me since I was 18. They wouldn’t if I was fae.”

“I know you’re not fae, little thing. I don’t know what the fuck you are, but you’re not a hundred percent human.” Tats scrunched his face.

“What?” What was this moron talking about?

The long-haired werewolf took a step toward Tiger and K. “Let me lick him. I’ll figure it out.”

“NO!” Tiger and Tats yelled simultaneously. Tats grabbed the werewolf by the upper arm and pulled him. “Bones, let Ami decipher this shit.”

“This is bullshit.” Tiger still had his gun trained in the general direction of the supras. He elbowed K softly and pointed with his chin at the reduced bike. “Deixis, ain’t you gonna back me up here?”

K picked up the bike and tried to put it in his backpack. Tiger shook his head and pointed to K’s pocket.

Right. In case we need to run. How are we going to make it big again though?

Deixis gave Tiger a slight shake of his head then looked at Gaol. “Please help our guests to Ami.”

“Finally,” said Tats before turning into an impressive grey wolf. Bones followed suit, and his wolf form was a majestic brown beast.

Abattoir and K’s eyes found each other.

The warlock winked.

That was the last thing K saw before everything went black.

Chapter Eight

Thud.

Bunny and Tiger found themselves in a heap in the middle of a well-lit cavern.

Motherfuckin' supras.

Deixis materialized beside him. The owl landed on his shoulder a second later. The two werewolves transformed into men. The warlocks joined the group.

“Are you alright?” Tiger asked Bunny, who was rubbing his butt and trying to get up.

“Yes. You?”

“My ego is more hurt than my body.”

Bunny snickered. “That’s something.”

“Oh, shut up.” But Tiger smiled. Bunny seemed fine, more surprised than afraid.

Good.

Deixis walked to a girl sitting in a lotus position in a corner of the cavern. He murmured something in her ear. She opened her eyes.

The girl, Bunny, and Tiger straightened up together. She walked toward them. She looked seventeen but could easily be a thousand years old. Her hair was the color of honey, her eyes green like a virgin field. Spiky boots and leather leggings seemed incongruent with her gauzy blouse that shimmered faintly in the surreal light. Now that Tiger had the chance to actually look, he realized that the light emanated from the walls.

“Welcome. I’m Ami.” Her voice had a wind-chime quality that was soothing and scary at the same time, like a storm contained in a jar.

Maybe he’d hit his head when they landed because his mouth wasn’t connected to his brain. “Ami doesn’t sound like a fae name.”

“My real name has twenty-six letters and it’s unpronounceable for the non-fae. It might make your ears bleed.” The last sentence was a threat delivered with a smile.

“Ami is fine.”

“Don’t I look like an Ami to you?”

“You look like whatever you wanna look like, doll,” Tiger said, pulling Bunny toward him.

Bunny let his body melt into his and softly pushed Tiger’s head toward his mouth to whisper, “If you do that again, I’m going to hurt your body *and* your ego in front of all these supras. I’m not a damsel in distress.” He kissed Tiger’s cheek.

“I ain’t promisin’ shit.” Tiger chuckled and returned the kiss softly on Bunny’s lips. He felt Bunny tremble.

“Tell me your story, Themistocles,” Ami said, appraising their joined bodies.

“I go by Tiger, lady.” Tiger smiled. “We’re honeymooners on our way to Mega-Vegas, and a fucking bloodsucker decided my husband here looked tasty enough for a meal.” Good thing fae were not mind readers. That was a skill only very few witch people could manage. Gaol and Abattoir didn’t look like the type, but he was about to discover if they were.

“Sounds reasonable enough.” Ami tilted her head, her honey-colored curls moving sideways in that uncanny way that only fae hair could, in a reverse motion.

“I don’t believe them,” that asshole Tats griped. “Tall’s a fae trying to pass as human. And the kid... I don’t know what the fuck the kid is.”

Ami’s eyes moved from Bunny and Tiger to Deixis; she narrowed them. “Quarter, eighth?”

“Probably eighth, lower than that would not register.” Deixis nodded with a semi-shrug.

This is bullshit.

Tiger blurted, “What the fuck are y’all talkin’ about? I ain’t no fae. I’d know if I was fae.”

“Shhhhh.” Ami put her hand over Tiger’s forehead and closed her big eyes.

It prickled, and Tiger seriously wanted to smack her, but she was so pretty he felt like that would be an unforgivable sin.

“Swamp, spices, great-grandfather.” Her eyes snapped open. “You have to have some special abilities in you. Even an eighth fae makes you more than a normal human.”

Well, that might explain a lot of things, but Tiger kept his mouth shut. His hand was over Bunny's heart, and he noticed the acceleration of its tempo. *Time to move this thing along.*

“Listen, Ami. It was self-defense. If you'd be so kind as to tell the warlock gentleman to un-shrink my bike, we'll be out of y'all's hair in a jiffy.”

Ami did her head-tilting again.

“Hold up. There's a bounty on their heads. I don't even believe they're together. I'm not buying the whole 'my husband' thing.” Tats said “my husband” like someone doing vinegar gargles.

A growl emerged from Bunny. “What is your fucking problem, moron? From the get-go you've been questioning every little thing. What is it, blue balls? Why don't you let Bones give you a nice fuck and go on with your shitty life? Maybe you need to be gangbanged? We can all help with that. I'm pretty sure we could even get a dildo for Ami to join us.” Before Tats could jump him, Bunny shrugged Tiger off and pulled out his gun. “I'm tired of your bullshit.” But he didn't shoot.

“Unless you got silver bullets in that piece, you're just bluffing.” Tats smirked with fake nonchalance.

“I don't want to kill you. I just want to hurt you. Haven't you noticed I'm aiming at your dick?”

“You can't do that.” Bones sprang to shield Tats with his body.

The gun flew from Bunny's hand and landed on Gaol's waiting palm. “There's no need for violence. There's a way to prove if they're together.”

“What, you want me to fuck him in front of you? Just let me get the butt-juice.” Bunny had his fists clenched.

What's with little Bunny thinking he's going to fuck me?

“Nobody is getting butt-juice. Anyone can fuck, boy. Any of us could fuck you two and even enjoy it. No. Nothing says love like the eyes of a man on his knees.”

“Okay, I'll do it.”

“Bunny, no!”

They didn't have to prove anything to these supras. They would find another way. Tiger would appeal to Ami's female sensitivities. Surely there were things she could do to verify their self-defense claim. If they had to come clean and tell the entire truth, Tiger would rather do that than let these fuckers watch Bunny sucking him.

“Not you kid. Tiger.”

Tiger should be enraged, but something inside him sighed, relieved. The idea of him on his knees didn't seem as much of an aberration as the other option. He turned Bunny around to face him. He caressed a high cheekbone with his thumb. “It's alright.”

“But I'm a...”

Yes, Bunny was a companion and, as such, was an expert on showing attraction and desire and lust. Perhaps Gaol couldn't read minds but was able to sense things and suspected Bunny's profession.

“I'm a rebel, remember?” Tiger traced his lips over Bunny's before giving him a soft kiss. “It's our honeymoon after all.”

A tremor seized Bunny as Tiger's hands rested on those slim shoulders. “It's not right,” Bunny said throatily and turned to Ami. “You're their leader, do something.”

Ami shook her head and flailed her hands like someone disgusted. “I'm their guide, and sometimes you need to let those you're guiding get away with what they want.” She pointed an accusatory finger at them. “I don't know what you wish to accomplish other than a free show. There are places for that. I don't care if they're married or not. If they killed that vamp in self-defense we will let them go. I'm leaving you to have your fun, pervs, and will come back to verify their claim. Deixis come with me.”

“But...” Deixis opened his mouth and pointed at Bunny and Tiger—a kid not wanting to miss the destruction of the piñata. Even his owl seemed scandalized by Ami's request, flailing its wings.

“Really?” Ami huffed. “Stay then.” She vanished.

“Guys, I can do a spell...” Abattoir started. “We don't need to embarrass them.”

“Sugar, the werewolves always follow what we say without complaining. If Tats is uncomfortable with them, there must be a reason.” Gaol rested his hand on Abattoir’s shoulder then whispered something in his ear.

Abattoir snickered. “Okay.”

“Gentlemen, please ease Tats’s concerns.” Gaol waved his hand in a “go ahead” manner.

“The only thing that would ease that fucker is cock,” Bunny hissed.

“Bunny!”

Sweet Fanaqua, the kid doesn’t know when to shut it.

“Well, you’re about to show him some,” Gaol riposted, amused.

“Hey,” Tats snarled, moving forward, but Bones held him back.

Tiger grabbed Bunny’s face with both hands. He liked that Bunny was feisty, but this wasn’t the moment for that. He pressed their brows together. “Please, love. Stop poking the mutt,” he whispered. A soft chuckle escaped those soft Bunny lips.

Slender arms encircled Tiger’s waist. It felt incredibly right. Their eyes met, and Bunny uttered gently, “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not.”

Chapter Nine

Violet eyes peered between thick white-blond lashes as Tiger, on his knees, unbuckled K's belt. They shouldn't be doing this. They shouldn't be giving these morons the show they wanted. Nevertheless, in his heart of hearts, K knew he wanted to see Tiger's lips wrapped around his cock, to see those cheeks hollow as Tiger sucked with purpose because perhaps their lives depended on his performance. Still, beyond the urgency of the moment, that unnamed thing inside K (stubbornly aware of Tiger's every move, every breath) desperately needed to savor the big man's submission.

K took a moment to scowl at the supras around them. All seemed eager for the spectacle, except Abattoir, who honestly looked like someone debating between shame and uninhibited interest.

"Don't pay attention to them. Focus on me and be sure that I'm doing this with pleasure because I love you," Tiger said, loud enough for the others to hear, with an open grin.

They were just playing a part, in full survival mode, but shoot K if his mulish, inner starry-eyed child didn't want it to be something more meaningful. Nevertheless, as much as his brain and his heart hoped for a deeper connection, his body was totally fine with the present scenario. His cock was hard and eager, his pulse was on hyperdrive, and even his hole was clenching expectantly.

Peeling K's pants apart, Tiger gave open kisses to the column concealed by thin underwear. K sighed, wanting to let his eyes roll back, but he would not give these fuckers the satisfaction of watching his pleasure. He forced his eyes to stay glued to Tiger's handsome face, in the same way those strange-colored eyes were trained on him, bewitching, enticing, challenging. K rested his hand on Tiger's cheek, not just to steady himself but to tell Tiger with the contact... he didn't know exactly what; he just hoped Tiger could sense his intention, even when it wasn't clear to K.

Tiger nodded briefly, then nuzzled K's awakened cock—a beast clamoring to be uncovered. He inhaled deeply, his face glowing with the satisfaction of someone thoroughly enjoying himself, but there was something in the liquidity of his eyes that was beyond enjoyment, and the promise languidly swimming in those violet oceans made K tremble.

“Enough!”

That one screamed word shattered the magic web their staring eyes were weaving.

“I believe them. Fuck this.” Tats sounded disgruntled.

Tiger stood up, zippering K up in the same motion. He embraced K and kissed him on the forehead. K hated these brotherly forehead kisses more and more by the second. This was the moment where Tiger should have been French-kissing the fuck out of him—to seal their cover, of course. He whispered in K's ear, “We're lucky wolves must honor the bond of soul mates in the same way they honor those of parents and their children.”

Soul mates?

Had they really seemed like soul mates to these wolves? K looked at Bones, and the werewolf gave him a thumbs-up, accompanied by a seriously beautiful smile.

“Even better, they only wanted to get the reward; if their intention had been to kill, we'd have been doomed together. You know, 'cause they wouldn't be so cruel as to force someone to live without his mate.” Sarcasm flowed thick in Tiger's tone.

“Or a parent without his child,” K murmured, remembering that the murder rate in the East Area was practically zero. Werewolves followed the Talion Law, thus convicted murderers died along with their immediate family. A heavy hand on K's shoulder made him swivel.

“There's something about you two that is so dreamy, I've been rooting for you since the beginning,” Abattoir said, shaking K lightly.

“You're a nice warlock. You don't see many of those nowadays.” Tiger snickered.

“‘Witches are bitches,’ says the popular song.” Abattoir smiled.

“I heard that.” Gaol approached them, his many layers of fur shrinking into a fashionable vest. That was a lot better than his former fur fuck-fest, but there was no help for his obnoxious Viking helmet. He offered K his hand. “Sorry, kid, I was just trying to help you. Wolves can be cranky, and Tats is a very cranky motherfucker.” He eyed the werewolf, who was growling softly under his breath, his arms crossed in a very pissed off fashion.

“They can still be vamp-killers,” Tats grumbled.

“Aren't we all?” Bones elbowed Tats, chortling. “C'mon. Let's have something to drink while Ami returns.” He pulled Tats's braid. “Move.”

Those two need to fuck ASAP.

Deixis seemed a block of ice. Fae and vampires shared a way of standing still that was downright creepy. The owl on Deixis's shoulder acted as petrified as his master, making them both look like a strange statue. Tiger wagged a finger at the fae as they moved toward an opening in the wall K hadn't noticed before. “You and I are havin' a conversation later,” Tiger hissed.

This broke Deixis's stillness. Their eyes met, and there was a spark of challenge, and something else K couldn't quite decipher. The blond supra grumbled, “Yes, we are.”

The response made Tiger growl under his breath in a way so similar to Tats that K had to wonder if Tiger didn't have some unknown werewolf great-grandparent too.

Chapter Ten

A century before, people had an expression: man cave, referring to a place within a household where the male of said house could be manly, which mostly involved doing disorderly manly things. This kept their gadgets, games, and other “man” stuff away from the ladies of the place to avoid upsetting them. They entered a room with an enormous pool table, arcade video game machines, sports paraphernalia (collectibles from the Golden Siroccos, the most popular fae soccer team, figured prominently in one corner), even ancient weapons from a mish-mash of cultures hung beside Formula 1 posters. It was the epitome of man cave, not just because they were literally in a cave, but because the only thing that could make the room any manlier would be for the rock-carved walls to have chest hair. Coming from Tiger, who was as hairless as an eight ball, to say that chest hair equated to manliness was ironic; nonetheless, life had given him other things that surpassed hairy pecs.

Abattoir opened a giant fridge bursting at the seams with beers and pitched one to each of the supras. “Too early for humans?”

It was the middle of the summer and the sun went up seriously early. So, yeah it was an ungodly time of day to be drinking, but Tiger said, “It’s got to be happy hour somewhere.” He caught a beer pitched his way.

Bunny opened his beer with his teeth, and the supras cheered, all except Tats.

A holo-remote appeared on Gaol’s palm; he turned on the giant screen on the only smooth wall of the supracave. A round, firm ass was the first thing occupying most of the wide space.

“I know that ass anywhere!” Tiger blurted without thinking. He saw the way Bunny flinched and snorted. Tiger flinched inwardly a little and added softly, “That’s Channing Tatum in *Magic Mike*.”

Typical early morning programming: last century movies, not necessarily the most enlightening, but entertaining.

“Damn, you know your asses.” Bones snickered as he sat cross-legged on a huge, circular leather seat.

“Yeah, yeah, Channing was hot, but that Manganiello guy was way hotter.” Gaol punched buttons in his palm and the movie fast-forwarded to Joe

Manganiello dancing on a stage dressed as an early 2000s firefighter. In 2125, they used bodysuits so bulky there was nothing sexy about them.

“You know Manganiello used to play a werewolf in a show called *True Blood*. It was mostly about vampires but it was a good show.” Abattoir took a pull of his beer as he also assumed a cross-legged position over the bluish mist cloud he favored to move around.

Obviously, old vampire shows were a hit in the West Area, except for the Twilight Saga. There was a ban on those movies. Vamps were not happy about those shiny misconceptions; according to them, it was an insult to their kind.

Tiger couldn't care less.

“Some people say that *True Blood* show was a prediction of the times we're living in.” Bunny turned a chair around and straddled it, using the back to rest his chest, crossing his forearms over it. Those tribal tattoos on his arms made him look rowdy.

Tiger had to admit the position showed how nice and solid Bunny's ass was. The kid looked intently at the screen as Gaol surfed options. The warlock found the *True Blood* show and chose an episode mostly focused on werewolves.

“That's one hot-ass beast,” commented Ami two seconds after she materialized in the room as Manganiello transformed from wolf to glorious nakedness.

“That idiot is no werewolf.” Tats shook his shoulders as if ready to shift.

Ami rolled her eyes. “Aren't you bitchy today? What's wrong with you? We're not even near the full moon. You're worse than a female human on her period.”

Her words made Tats flinch, and that added another one to the flinch score inside the supras' man cave. Ami moved to the fridge and got a beer for herself. “So, are they in love or what?” she asked, looking straight at Tats.

“Yes, they are.”

Are we?

True, there was maybe five percent of Tiger that wasn't acting. His attraction to Bunny was becoming stronger by the minute, but from that to actually looking like they were in love was a huge stretch. Still, both Bunny and he were excellent actors, thus there was no way to blame the supras for being so gullible.

Someone staked a vampire on the show; it exploded into a blob of red mess, just like they did in real life. Whoever wrote that show knew vampires. A collective whoop emerged, accompanied by the rise of beer bottles. Funny, because Tiger was almost sure they were still in the chunk of Texas that was part of the West Area, or as these supras would say, "Vampland."

"That's the thing I don't understand about vampires. They are quote immortals, which means not subject to death, but you can kill them. Shouldn't they be called longevous or long-lived instead of immortals?" Bunny commented as he finished his beer. The way his Adam's apple moved with the last swallow had Tiger's cock thinking about becoming a rock.

Well, desire ain't love, right?

"Vampires have perpetuated that bullshit myth so people think they are invincible." Bones abandoned the leather seat and went for more beer. "Guys?" he asked to the room at large, waving a beer bottle.

Deixis sat with his elbows resting on his thighs, slowly turning the beer bottle and staring at it, as if in its rotation was the answer to all the mysteries of the universe. That two-timing, no good, son of a fae bitch knew Tiger had some extra genes in him and hadn't ever said a word. They were going to have words. He started to move toward the bastard when a firm grip held him in place; Tiger swiveled to face whoever it was, and was shocked to see it was Ami.

"It's time to check the veracity of your claims," she said with a hiked eyebrow.

"Be my guest, then." Tiger shrugged her off. "Do I need to be naked for that? 'Cause these fuckers didn't get their show."

"Nudity is unnecessary, but if you feel the need to flaunt all that—" she did an up and down motion, pointing at his body "*—I wouldn't mind the show.*"

"Ahem." Bunny pulled him away from Ami. "Love, be nice."

Was that a faint trace of jealousy in Bunny's sweet voice? Nah, Tiger must be imagining things. Did he want to imagine things? No, no, he didn't.

"Someone doesn't want *you* to parade *all that.*" Bones snickered.

"Dressed it is. Please lie down."

Tiger made himself comfortable on the large, circular leather seat. It was like a giant, navy blue cheese wheel.

She put up her hand so the holo-remote could float toward it. A few key punches, and *True Blood* turned into static.

“Now, close your eyes and let me do my thing.” Ami helped him to close his eyes with a soft hand gliding over his eyelids.

Immediately, Tiger felt weight over his eyes, like smooth stones or coins, and the image of how people burnt their dead in antiquity (putting coins on their eyes for the boatman) made him shudder.

That uneasiness was the last thing he remembered.

Chapter Eleven

K didn't know what to think about the stones (one white, the other black) that Ami set over Tiger's eyes. They didn't look heavy, but Tiger instantly went rigid and appeared not to be breathing. He tried to go to Tiger, but Abattoir held him in place. "He's all right. She knows what she's doing," he said soothingly and slowly released K.

Short of kicking and thrashing, the only option was to wait and see what would happen.

Ami chanted over Tiger's head, doing hand passes as if she was rifling through a really messy underwear drawer. K tried to stay alert (because they were still unsure of the supras' real intentions) but that unnamed thing inside him giggled. Amid a situation like this, any other person would have thought of Ami's actions as rummaging through a socks drawer, or something less lusty. But not him. For reasons K didn't have the courage to start investigating, he saw himself sneaking to sniff Tiger's used undies in a dark corner of a laundry room, even if his filthy mind insisted that Tiger usually went commando, which didn't help a bit with the growing bulge in his pants.

Tiger's lips were slightly parted, and that mouth looked kissable and inviting.

"Not so fast."

K wheeled around, startled by Marcus's voice within the cave. The vampire was supposed to be dead.

"Who is this man taking you upstairs?" The hiss came from the wall screen that had been full of static only a moment earlier. Marcus's murderous glare was aimed at K. No—not at K, but at Tiger. The screen was showing what happened from Tiger's perspective.

"I'm his fuckin' husband. We havin' a problem, vamp?" Tiger's narrowed eyes focused on Marcus's hand around K's arm, and the image had a red tinge to it.

"We do now." Marcus's fangs emerged, and K was thrown to the upper landing.

Now K saw those few seconds he had not witnessed before. Surprisingly, the images moved in slow motion as if Ami had activated the frame-by-frame

option. Marcus jumped, and Tiger caught him by the waist and threw him into the middle of the bar to land on a full table, all its occupants scattering before being clearly aware of what was happening. Jabs, kicks, headbutts, fangs, claws moved disturbingly fast in what was supposed to be an unhurried recollection.

“Why are you playing with the speed?” Tats asked in his usual gruff tone.

“I’m not doing anything. Tiger has the *bardagamaður* trait. During battle, the actions of others will slow for the warrior so he can make the right decisions to attack more effectively. That’s the fae in him.”

“Asshole,” Tats said under his breath this time.

Where are some fucking silver bullets when you need them?

“So what we’re seeing as fast must be happening at lightning speed.” Abattoir ran his hand over his face and whistled.

“He said he had special training,” K offered defiantly.

“That might be true, but without *bardagamaður* that would be for naught.” Ami smiled. “Perhaps one regular human in a million can learn to fight at vampire speed with training, but the fae in Tiger makes it second nature to him.”

Tiger beheaded Marcus, and all the supras in the room (except Ami) cheered, “YES.”

The images moved through the crowd, Tiger was looking for K. Vampires came out of the woodwork, and a brawl of epic proportions started. It was weird to see things from this disembodied perspective. K saw himself draw his weapon and move down the stairs two at a time. But there was something in him that wasn’t there before; some kind of glow was emerging from every surface of his body that wasn’t covered by clothes.

The supras looked at K askance.

“I told you he wasn’t human.”

Okay, no silver bullets, what about a muzzle?

“Tats, you need to chill out. I’m starting to think this is a kindergarten crush. You act like you hate him, but in reality you’ve got the hots for him.” Gaol’s tone was one of amusement, but his face was a terrifying mask of disdain. And that ridiculous Viking helmet paired with impossibly thick arms made it even worse. Gaol looked downright savage.

The wolf growled but didn't say another word. Back on the screen, Tiger was pulling K out of the bar, and, as they ran together, Tiger looked back several times, and the glow was less visible each time.

"I guess we ain't stayin' here tonight." Tiger's voice had the ring of someone enjoying himself far too much, then his eyes closed and something like a moan emerged.

K calculated it had been the moment when he circled Tiger's waist and held on for dear life. K felt his face on fire, and that was something that wasn't supposed to happen to a companion.

"You're an intriguing little thing," commented Deixis, suddenly beside him. He traced a finger downward along K's arm. "We need to find out what you are."

"Deixis," Ami warned. "He's not a thing, and he has a husband."

"How daring the fae when my husband is unconscious." K tilted his head a little. "Before that you were acting all suicidal. Just because he is blond doesn't mean I like all blonds."

"How dare you?" Deixis's eyes flashed red.

Abattoir stepped between them. "The boy is right. What's up with you?"

"He's not a supra." Deixis shrugged. "What if he's a threat to us?"

"Yeah," Tats agreed.

"Listen, wolf." K swiveled to face Tats. "You need to get the fuck out of my balls before whatever I am explodes in your face."

Ami made a placating gesture and walked to K. "Do you know what you are?"

K shook his head. "It's the first time I've heard something is different about me."

"Tiger didn't say anything about you glowing like that?"

"No."

"Do you want us to find out?"

Do I?

Ami had assured they would be left alone if the vampire's murder had been in self-defense, but what if these supras decided he was dangerous once they

discovered what made him different? K only wanted to be human, to be human in Meridian.

Perhaps with Tiger by his side.

“What I want right now is for you to wake my husband up.”

Chapter Twelve

When Tiger woke up, his bike was full-size again, and it was in the middle of the supras' man cave. He was told in a rather firm tone to get a shower and change clothes as breakfast was put together.

Bunny had an undecipherable expression on his face, his hands in his pockets. He wore a red sleeveless hooded T-shirt that made him look like a little kid who had lost his parents in some supermall.

Showered and fed, Tiger was extremely ready to say *thanks-y'all-and-buh-bye* when they explained their intention to test Bunny.

"No fuckin' way. Y'all ain't doin' no experiments on him," Tiger spat as he pulled Bunny closer—by the shoulders because he didn't want the kid to kneel him in his testes.

Bunny circled Tiger's waist possessively. "You heard him. Can we go now?"

"But you saw the glow coming from him." Bones bobbed his head, his inquiring eyes devouring Tiger. "Aren't you curious at least?"

"I didn't see nothin'," Tiger lied. He had seen it, but (with all the shit happening around them) he hadn't given it too much thought. Right now his only concern was to get away from these supras. "Y'all as suprabein's are bonded to your word. Self-defense equals Freedom. You did your mumbo-jumbo, we leave."

"That was before we knew he was something weird." Tats stalked toward them.

"I thought Gaol muzzled you, werewolf. When are you going to shut the fuck up?" Bunny barked.

"Shhh, love." Tiger kissed the top of Bunny's head, moving his hand up and down along Bunny's arm in what he hoped was a soothing manner. "Remember your own words, we're outnumbered."

"I know that, but this idiot is trying my patience."

"I heard that." Tats shuddered, and his eyes flashed gold.

"He wasn't whispering," Bones said and pulled Tats by the wrist with a chuckle.

“Ami said this after we arrived and Tats had informed her of his concerns about Bunny and I, so yes, freedom was offered with the knowledge of our, er, differences on the table.”

Gaol moved from the wall where he had been leaning with his arms crossed. “Tiger’s right. Let’s let them go to be someone else’s problem. It is their right to defend themselves and their bond, as they did against that clingy bloodsucker.”

“What if he’s dangerous to us supras?” Deixis wasn’t looking at Bunny and Tiger but actually pleading with Ami.

“We chose to live in exile, so it isn’t up to us to protect the rest of the suprabeings.” Gaol stopped, facing Deixis.

Tiger forgot he was trying to be diplomatic. “Deixis, you motherfucker.”

“Oh, shut up, Themistocles. I know your only true love is gold. You probably just made him fall in love with you to take him some place where humans could study him and get a reward for your troubles.”

Before Deixis could close his mouth properly or Tiger could react to the words, Bunny had already launched himself at Deixis, delivering a right hook to the jaw and a well-aimed knee in the fae’s kiwis. They went to the floor together, and Bunny became a punch machine. Everybody was too startled for a moment to do anything, even Deixis.

Tiger jumped to pull Bunny away because he knew the moment the fae came back to his senses Bunny would be in a whole world of trouble. “Please, baby.” He embraced Bunny to restrain him. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Bunny froze in Tiger’s arms, and let Tiger pull him off Deixis. He turned around, still encircled by Tiger’s embrace, and hissed, “He doesn’t have the right to question your loyalty. I know you’ll never betray me like that.”

And with those words, just like that, Tiger knew he would never betray Bunny consciously. He brushed Bunny’s hair. “I’ll never hurt you, love.” He kissed the top of Bunny’s head, and Bunny grabbed his face and pulled Tiger down for a kiss that was desperate, hungry, demanding.

There were no supras, no cave, no vampire’s murder, just them, and Tiger hiked Bunny up, lean legs wrapping around Tiger’s waist, and their arms turning into the ferocious tentacles of the Kraken, vying to claim and conquer.

Yes, these weren't the acres of hair Tiger loved; the weight he was so desperately clinging to lacked (at least) eighty pounds of the usual amount his arms were used to handling. Still, everything in little Bunny was manly and glorious and abso-fucking-lutely delicious. And Tiger wanted this lightweight piece of heaven like he hadn't wanted anything in eons.

The thing was, amid all the *I-want-to-eat-you* and *I-don't-care-if-you-ain't-six-four-and-two-hundred-fifty-pounds* explosion of desire, there was something else, something more serene and grounding and freaking scary. But as Bunny's tongue inspected (with unquestionable authority) the depths of Tiger's mouth, Tiger didn't have the wherewithal to herd his brain cells to cohesion. He was all instincts and sweet, irrevocable need.

His hands found the hem of Bunny's tee, and he was in the frantic process of pulling it upward to get rid of it to lap at creamy, pale skin like a hungry beast when a cough stopped him short.

Shit, we ain't alone in some seedy motel room, and I almost showed the gold in his girdle-purse.

"As much as I know that the boys wouldn't mind the show," said Ami, with a tiny hint of amusement in her ethereal voice, "and I can see various stages of hardness, I will recommend you two wait until you're somewhere else to continue your honeymoon."

"Sweet Fanaqua." Bunny groaned, clinging to Tiger's neck.

Tiger chuckled and kissed a high cheekbone. "That expression is mine," he whispered softly.

"I think I used my allotted amount of swearing for the month already," Bunny offered with a shrug and a wink. "I don't even know what it means, but it sounds like a really good alternative to the f-bomb."

"I read it in one of my mother's books when I was a teenager."

"Ahem."

Right, monsters surrounding us.

"Gaol is going to put you back on the superhighway, so you can be on your merry way to Mega-Vegas." Ami looked at Tiger pointedly, as if saying "put the kid down already."

"We're going to let them go just like that?" Deixis and Tats almost trampled each other as they moved to grab Ami, uttering the same words, one in the cavernous tone of the wolves, the other in the crystal ring of the fae.

Ami waved her hand, and both supras were flung toward different corners of the room, landing with resounding thuds. “Enough of you two. Bunny and Tiger are free to leave. End of discussion.”

Deixis's owl flew from its perch to comfort his master with soothing hoots.

As Bones and Abattoir approached them, Tiger let Bunny slide along his body until he was standing on his own feet. Tiger would analyze the shiver that had provoked later, when they were safe. Both took fighting stances. The supras held their hands up.

“We don't mean to harm you,” said Bones.

“We're on your side,” added Abattoir.

“Gaol, darling, take *us* to the surface.” Ami gave Tiger a nice, angelic grin.

Before he could reciprocate, all went black.

Chapter Thirteen

This time the landing was a lot more dignified. K opened his eyes to find himself alongside Tiger and the supras (if his sense of orientation was correct) in the same spot where they had been captured? Taken into custody? He didn't know what to name their eye-rolling encounter with this band of supras.

They were beside the superhighway, the sun at its zenith with no clouds to threaten the oppressive summer heat. The vast, arid nothingness surrounded them in every direction except for the eight-lane strip of blacktop dividing this stretch of desert.

K turned to grasp Ami's hand and say good-bye when horrid whistles sounded.

Great balls of fire came out of nowhere, their long tails of black smoke making them seem like confused comets from a madman's inferno. The first fell on the middle of the superhighway, tar exploding in every direction.

"The fuck?" Bones cried.

"Jump on the motorcycle. We'll take care of this!" Ami pushed K toward Tiger.

Abattoir was zipping in his little cloud, dodging the falling bombs and turning them into less dangerous things before they touched the ground: sacks of potatoes, pillows, mattresses, crates of fruits (as if the same spell could not work the same way each time).

Gaol's horse emerged from the ground, and he pulled Bones up to straddle the horse behind him. He was casting spells upward, in the direction from which the bombs seemed to come, but K couldn't see an actual target. He could only see the fireworks-like energy launching from Gaol's hands.

"What are you waiting for? Run, boy, run!" Ami yelled. A translucent dome surged around her, and she sent it toward Tiger and K with a violent fling of her arms.

The shift in the energy around them was palpable, and a hand grabbed his wrist. "Bunny, please!" Tiger urged, and he dragged K away from the exploding bombs since Abattoir couldn't transform them all quick enough; there were too many.

“They’re going to die, Tiger. We need to help them!” K tried to wrench his wrist from Tiger’s hold.

“They have powers. We don’t, Bunny baby. Please!”

“No. NOOO!” K finally broke Tiger’s grasp, and with his physical scream came an inner scream. He felt scorching heat growing inside him, as if one of the bombs was erupting from deep within his body, turning him into a blazing mass of power. A power that wasn’t destroying him but surging forward like a tsunami, like an avalanche, like a million nukes launched in all directions at once.

His cry was the cry of all beasts, of all creatures, of all living things, and the light emanating from K expanded until it was more blinding than the sun above them. The fire bombs disintegrated in midair as the radius widened. Above them, the hovercrafts from where the bombs originated became visible, and they saw new explosions. Charred pieces fell in a meteor shower that turned rapidly into ashes by the power of the light still coming from K.

The supras swiveled, trying to find the source of the unknown power that had just saved their lives, and the masks of confusion and horror when they discovered it didn’t surprise K but made him feel dizzy as self-consciousness tried to seize him. The force pouring out of him squashed this second of doubt, and he stood tall and confident, knowing that he had done the right thing, especially after seeing the fanged-daggers of the Vampire Council etched under the attacking hovercrafts.

“It’s over, Bunny. You can stop.” Tiger’s voice was gentle in K’s ear as those strong arms embraced him and pulled him flush to the hard chest.

K nodded and called the brutal ocean of light and heat he had liberated back to his body. Slowly, it retraced its path, eager to return to its master. And as the destructive energy coalesced into him, K understood the origin of the power, the nature of his being. Freeing and overwhelming, the knowledge clarified a thousand things and posed a thousand more questions—not about his past, but about his future.

Those latter questions were the ones that finally made K sag into Tiger’s protective hug under their weight. “Fanaqua...”

“Yes. What you did does deserve a whooping, all capital letters Fanaqua,” Tiger chuckled.

Darkness descended upon K, and the last coherent thing he could grasp was the feeling of Tiger's whisper of a kiss on top of his head.

Chapter Fourteen

DAY FOUR

“Welcome back,” Tiger offered as Bunny opened his eyes.

Blue eyes narrowed, smiling. “Hey.” Bunny moved his hands over the *who-knew-how-many-thousand-threads-count* Egyptian cotton sheets.

“You were out for twenty-eight hours. I’m glad you decided to come back to me.”

Well, that didn’t come out right.

Technically, Tiger didn’t have any claim on Bunny, but Fanaqua and a half if that feeling growing inside him didn’t scream otherwise.

Bunny pushed himself a little upward and took stock of his surroundings. “Where are the supras?”

“They’re fine. Apparently, Gaol’s transportation spell from their secret cave only takes you back to whatever place they took you from, so we were in the same spot on the superhighway, but after your, er, demonstration...” Tiger paused, not sure how to touch the issue. “After you destroyed the vampires’ hovercrafts, they transported us immediately to the outskirts of Mega-Vegas, away from the West Area limits.” He shrugged. “We’re in a suite of the Ultra.”

Tilting his head slightly and staring at Tiger, Bunny was silent for a moment. “They didn’t ask why I was unconscious?”

“There was a lot of fae glamour involved.”

This made Bunny snicker. He sobered up quickly though. “Sorry I didn’t give you your first half the other night.”

“What?”

“You know, your payment.”

“Oh. That. Well...”

This wasn’t the conversation Tiger wanted to have at the moment. His priorities had changed a lot in the last twenty-four hours.

“I understand if you’re horrified by me and just want to be on your way. I guess I can find a way to get to Meridian from here. It’s less than a hundred miles. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“What crawled up your ass, Bunny? Why would I be horrified?”

“Your face spoke volumes when you said ‘demonstration.’”

“Are you fuckin’ serious now?”

“I’d not hold it against you if you just get your money and leave me here.”
Bunny did his own nonchalant shrug. “It’s not like I’m helpless.”

“I thought we’d already established that. What I am doubtin’ right now is your intelligence.”

“Oh, fuck off, Tiger. What? Am I supposed to believe all the acting we did to get us here was something real?” Bunny shook his head with a sigh. “I might look young, but I’m not a starry-eyed child. I’m a grown-ass man, and I’ve seen a lot. More than you might think.”

Tiger took Bunny by the shoulders and gave him a shake. “Listen, you idiot...” But words would not do it. He pulled Bunny to him and kissed those tempting, rosy lips hard.

Bunny went stiff for a heartbeat. A heartbeat that seemed an eternity, but then teeth bit Tiger’s lips, and they became all snarls and growls and bites and clashing tongues.

The moment Tiger flung the covers aside, Bunny disentangled himself from Tiger. “Wait! I heard you talking in your sleep about going to live with the werewolves and find yourself a nice big beast to share your days.”

Me and my big-mouthed sleep-talking.

“That was before.”

“Before what?”

“Before I learned your value.”

That came out wrong. Pull it together, man.

Bunny narrowed his eyes again, and this time it wasn’t a pretty gesture. “Do I need to give credit to Deixis’s words?”

“Deixis is a giant fae hemorrhoid. You shouldn’t trust him to tell you the color of the sky even if he says it’s blue and you’re seein’ it with your own eyes.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.” Bunny shrugged away from Tiger’s embrace. The headboard stopped him from moving further.

“You said it yourself, you ain’t helpless. You could easily defend yourself if I try to pull a fast one on you.” Tiger winked, intent on lightening the mood and taking them back to *nearly-clothes-ripping* madness.

“That’s true.”

“Would you trust me?”

“I want to.”

“What’s stoppin’ you?”

“I don’t trust anyone.”

“Then we both need to work on our trustin’ skills.”

“Sounds like a reasonable enough goal.”

“I hope so.” Tiger took Bunny’s hand in his and made circles on the space between thumb and index finger. He smiled, not sure what else to say to ease Bunny’s distrust.

“Can we go back to kissing?” Bunny’s grin was unexpected and abso-fucking-lutely welcome.

“Just kissin’?” Tiger grinned back.

“For now.”

Chapter Fifteen

Was there something worse than a companion withholding sex when he really, truly wanted it as badly as the man he was holding onto?

They sped toward Meridian many hours after K awoke from his destruction-induced coma, with night approaching sluggishly toward them. He seriously needed to get naked and personal with Tiger, but he had decided to wait until they were within the limits of the human-controlled city. That way, if things went awry, he could ensure closeness to his freedom once he had finished using his newly discovered powers. This was his pragmatic side asserting its supremacy over his wishful side, which hoped that Tiger was feeling the same things he was feeling and would agree to stay with him in Meridian. Everything pointed to that scenario, but they still hadn't had a discussion about K's nature, and that was the third, ugly party, rubbing its hands sinisterly in one corner of K's mind and watching the turmoil with a nasty grin like some perverse villain in an old-fashioned movie.

What if Tiger couldn't live with what K was?

K himself wasn't sure what his purpose was. This knowledge was too new, too shiny, to be fully grasped and assimilated. Were there others like him? Should he try to find them? There must be others since he wasn't a mutation. Perhaps he could be called an aberration, but he was not going to start putting tags on himself. He was here, and he believed that everything had a reason, even if it wasn't evident from the get-go.

Squeezing Tiger's waist tighter than before, K wondered if his nature was what had pushed his parents to move to the West Area. Had they wanted him to be studied by the vampires? Was he squashing his parents' last wish by fleeing?

Tiger let go of one of the handles of the bike and moved his hand backward to touch K's helmet above his cheek. It was a comforting gesture; perhaps he had sensed K's distress through the squeeze. It was beyond stupid to torture himself with these silly interrogations. He could not know what his parents wanted or thought; they were out of reach and unable to give him guidance.

There was no other option than to accept the counsel of his own instincts, and those were telling him he had done the right thing by coming to Meridian. K would settle down there, and after he had found some rhythm in his new,

populous city, he'd find a way to figure out the power and its purpose. Now, figuring out Tiger was more important, even if it implied trusting, and that notion was as alien as his newfound powers to K.

A first for everything, right?

The inspection point neared. K didn't know what he had expected—at least a barbed wired fence, not the solitary almost shabby structure beside the road. It brought to mind a giant, abandoned shoebox; one only knew it was an active setting because a buzzing force field between two posts on each side of the superhighway blocked the path. A holoboard showed the steps to follow.

They parked the bike, dismounted, put away the helmets, dusted and straightened their jackets, and K adjusted his backpack. “Do you think it wise to have braided your hair like that?” K asked Tiger, who had tiny braids pulling his temple hair away from his face in a very fae fashion. K had to admit the style suited Tiger, and he also had to admit it wasn't helping to keep his libido at bay.

“Ain't nothing bad with embracin' your eighth. It's not like they can deny me entrance. I'm not fully fae.”

Since the light was slowly fading outside, the harsh glare inside the building was startling. “Welcome to Inspection Point 25, boys!” A perky woman in a lavender uniform, and sporting blue-black hair in a myriad corkscrew curls, approached them, a bounce in her step. She had big, violet eyes and seemed so happy to see them, her cheerfulness was overwhelming. “My name is Jaye, and I'll walk you through the admittance process. Identifications, please!” IDs were shown, and she asked, “What's your purpose for visiting Meridian?”

K opened his mouth, but Tiger stopped him, intertwining their fingers. “We're a couple, and we want a fresh start in your marvelous city.”

“How lovely,” she said in her spring-like, giggly tone. “Well, this is the part where I'm supposed to check you with my reader, but you see, that's pointless.”

Huh?

Both Tiger and K were ready to scratch their heads in confusion.

“The force field over the superhighway is a formality, sort of a visual reminder.” She punched some buttons on her clipboard. “The thousand miles reserved over the 100th meridian are bordered by all kinds of spells and incantations that prevent anything that is supra from crossing its limits. So even

if you were able to cheat the reader, the boundaries will turn you into dust.” This time she openly giggled, and it was seriously disturbing.

But not more disturbing than the information they had just received.

Tiger snickered with her. “We’ll be fine then, won’t we?”

“Of course, sweeting.” Her trillion curls bobbed as she nodded enthusiastically. A bell ding. She retrieved two plates that had emerged from an official-looking machine and handed one to Tiger and the other to K after inspecting the names on them. “Here you go. Have a lovely life!” She turned around, walked to a door and disappeared behind it with a resounding bang, leaving them baffled and speechless.

“What now?” K’s eyes searched Tiger’s for reassurance.

“We test the boundaries, Bunny. Ain’t nothing else to do.”

Outside, the stars were out and the force field was gone. They neared the bike. Tiger pulled K to his chest and kissed him, deep and needy. When they surfaced, because they needed to breathe, Tiger grasped K’s face with both hands and whispered, “You wanted proof that you could trust me. If we survive the boundaries, I’ll stay by your side as long as you want me to be.”

It’s a start.

“Thank you.” K opened his lips slightly for another kiss. Tiger kissed his forehead. “Back to that?” K huffed.

With a chuckle, Tiger turned him around and guided him to the bike, his hand possessively grabbing K’s ass.

They climbed on the bike, donned their helmets, and K circled Tiger’s body, pressing his frame and pouring all his feelings into the action.

The bike roared to life.

It veered onto the superhighway.

They crossed the boundaries.

Chapter Sixteen

Nothing happened.

Tiger threw his fist in the air triumphantly. K laughed happily, like he hadn't laughed in years.

Thirty minutes later the expanse of Meridian was visible by the lights competing with the starry sky. Tiger stopped the bike on the top of a hill, the city at their feet welcoming them. He waved a hand toward the vista and said happily, "All yours to eat it up."

"There's only one thing I want to eat right now. But before that, I need to tell you what I am."

"I don't care if you're the spawn of Cthulhu himself. There ain't nothing able to make me see you differently."

"Just let me tell you so we can put it behind us then."

"Alright."

"You know that old story about the sons of the Christian god mating with the daughters of men?"

Tiger looked at him for a moment like he had just caught K having an orgy with the band of supras in their secret lair. Then he snorted and guffawed, "That's a fuckin' myth!"

"Seriously?" K huffed. "The suprabeings were considered myth before they decided to become fully visible and take over the US."

This sobered Tiger up. "You're right. So you're a child of this human-god matin'?"

K nodded. "That's the knowledge that came to me as the power returned to my body after I destroyed the hovercrafts."

"Okay."

"That's it?"

"Uh-huh." Tiger shrugged. "I don't give a flyin', screamin' Fanaqua."

"So you're fine with me being Nephilim?"

Tiger bobbed his head and smiled broadly. “Hey, your parents are dead. I ain’t gotta worry about some demonic in-laws or awkward holiday festivities.”

And here I am, worrying about this like an imbecile.

“You fucker.” K fumbled with Tiger’s jacket to get rid of it.

Laughing and helping K out of his own jacket, Tiger asked, “Needy much?”

“Fuck yes.” K pushed Tiger to his knees. “You’d better finish what you started in those supras’ cave.” His pants pooled around his boots almost immediately.

“That’s an order, sir.” And Tiger’s wicked grin made K’s cock throb with anticipation.

An expert tongue circled his cock-head as an even more skillful hand pumped his shaft. K had to rest his hands on Tiger’s broad shoulders because he was losing consciousness and balance with every passing second. “Take your pants off,” he panted. Tiger gave him a quizzical look, his mouth busy with K’s girth.

Better than the most consummate companion, Tiger undid his boots, removed his pants and his underwear without missing a beat of the superb blowjob he was giving K. Nearing a climax he wanted to keep at bay, K pulled Tiger up and guided him toward the bike, using the transporter’s cock as if it was a controller. He punched the commands for TON2 mode on the bike, got the butt-juice from the compartment and made Tiger straddle the seat with his back to K.

“What are you doin’?” Tiger snickered, looking over his shoulder at K with mischievous eyes.

“I’m pretty sure you have done this before.”

“Not on my bike!”

“There’s a first time for everything.” K kissed from shoulder to shoulder as he squeezed a glob of butt-juice into his hand and applied it to Tiger’s wonderfully tight pucker. He was too wound up to take things slowly; he needed to be inside Tiger before he self-combusted.

Tiger hissed appreciatively as K’s fingers lubed the way. “I hate to sound like an inexperienced teenager, but the clock’s tickin’, and this nuke’s ready to explode.”

Two swipes of his cock-head over Tiger's hole, a growled moan as invitation, and K was to the hilt inside Tiger. The *Fuck-yeah* came out of both their mouths at the same time, and amid all the blinding lust, K couldn't help but chuckle.

Soon they found a nice rhythm, two pistons colliding, taking and receiving, invading and yielding, claiming and offering. K's hand roamed over Tiger's torso, his teeth leaving marks over hard, golden trapeziuses. Tiger's hands went the opposite direction, grabbing K's ass and squeezing and kneading and pulling him to ram his cock into Tiger's willing hole.

K wondered if the *bardagamaður* trait also worked while fucking, because Tiger seemed to anticipate his moves and counteract in a way that doubled his pleasure by the way his moans and pants became progressively louder.

"Tiger, I'm about to..."

"Fuck, Bunny. Mark me. Make me yours."

And those words were flint, trigger, and nuclear bomb passcode. As K's entire body trembled with his shattering climax, his companion reflexes made his hands seek Tiger's cock and, with a few pumps, bring another wave of ecstasy as Tiger's hole squeezed him anew with each spurt, until K was disoriented and satisfied.

A while later, after they had cleaned as best as they could the mess they'd made, K rested on top of Tiger's body, both over the immobile, *heavy-as-a-boulder* bike. "Told you I was going to be the one doing the fucking..."

"Yeah, just don't brag about it."

K nibbled on one of Tiger's nipples. "Why do you call me Bunny?"

"I call you Bunny 'cause no one else does. I gave you that name, and by givin' you a special name, I made you only mine. I did it unconsciously, but maybe my heart knew what you'd be to me even before I realized it. The day you're able to think about yourself as Bunny, you'll know this's true."

"Okay." K smiled.

After all, the ring on his finger didn't look bad, and it wasn't that hard to imagine himself as Tiger's Bunny.

The End

Glossary

Owatatsumi – One of the various names of the Dragon God, the tutelary deity of the sea in Japanese mythology

Fanaqua – Well, to know what this word means you need to check out [Broken Phoenix by Edmond Manning](#)

Bardagamaður – Icelandic for “fighter”

Author Bio

Born a Sagittarius in the fabulous year of the Rooster of '69, at the hour when his cat was about to become a complete dragon, Gabbo de la Parra landed on the Caribbean Coast of the outlandish Republic of Panama to start the adventure of Life.

Love and the Internet brought him to Middle Tennessee to embrace the American Dream and his husbandly romance. Writing has been an important part of his life since a very early age, and it's a pleasure to share his stories with others thanks to the wonderful opportunities this land provides. He is the author of the Spaniards series, Septima Luna and other titles available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Smashwords.

Gabbo cherishes Life with a southern gentleman in a townhouse close to a lake, crowded with the spirits of his characters, and their pets: black esoteric kitty, Luna; white emo-twink Maltese, Chance; and street smart Russian Blue, Bella.

His novel Another Dawn on Planet X (love child of his two stories for Love is Always Write) will come to your e-reading devices in Summer 2014, and The Pompeiian Horse in Autumn 2014.

Contact & Media Info

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METRONOMY

By Suki Fleet

Photo Description

A man in simple leather coat stands in what could be a crowded arena, a noose is around his neck as if he is about to be hung. His expression is defiant as he looks off to the side—he will not be beaten by this—but he also looks a little resigned, as if he knows this is it for him. There is a blood stain on his tunic, near his shoulder.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm not quite sure how I got myself into this bit of mess. But, what I am sure of is that I'm going to need some help getting out of it.

There's only one man that can come to rescue me from this trouble. Problem is, should he save the day, I might find myself in an even more precarious situation. I can't seem to keep my hands off him... and in this day and age? That should spell nothing but danger and disaster...

Thanks,

Susan

Story Info

Genre: historical, paranormal

Tags: friends to lovers, action/adventure, sorcerer, mild peril, domination, rescued from death

Word Count: 10,448

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METRONOMY

By Suki Fleet

My time has finally run out, I think, a sickening dread filling my stomach.

There is a noose around my neck, the rope coarse and scented with death.

The crowd jeers, throwing insults around the hay-strewn arena, their hostility palpable, but I won't close my eyes—I will look at every last one of them. I tell myself I'm not looking for *him*—not desperately seeking out his face. If Hunter is here, he'll make himself known. He wouldn't leave it to the last possible second to make his move.

Would he?

Like a black spot on the edge of my vision, the hangman makes his grim procession across the arena. They dress him in black and cover his head with a black cloth, two circles cut out for his eyes, but the whole town knows who he is. Perhaps the anonymity is for the three of us. I try to block him out, along with the crowd, the shouts, the scent of the unwashed bodies next to me, the stains on the boards beneath my filthy, shoeless feet. It's one of the first things they do before they shove you into the stinking holes they call prison cells, take your shoes—if you have any.

There are two boys on either side of me; they barely look eighteen. One of them is crying, tears streaking down his dirty face. The other wants to comfort him, I can see it in his expression. Watching his friend's (his lover's?) tears is killing him. Well, it'll all be over soon.

Where are you, Hunter?

I hate that I trust him. Ever since I was captured yesterday in this town on the border between our kingdom and the next, I've held fast to the thought that things wouldn't get this far, that he'll come for me. The guardian he'd left watching over me (the eagle he thinks I don't know about) had flown immediately to warn him that I'd been caught. She would have reached him in hours and he couldn't be more than a day's ride from here. Perhaps I *am* going to die the death of a miserable traitor in front of this ugly crowd.

The wooden platform we're standing on shakes as the hangman steps up, and I know this is it. To the outrage of the crowd, one of the boys begins to

struggle wildly, calling out to the other boy, telling him he loves him, pleading that they be allowed to hold one another's hand and straining against his bonds as if to reach for him in a desperate farewell. Their pain is almost tangible and it makes me long to have done things differently, makes me wish I had someone's hand to hold onto at the last, wish that I'd not left so much undone, unspoken, unrealised.

And in those last seconds I make a vow, perhaps it's pointless, but in what is left of this life and into the next, I vow to make it clear to the ones I love how I feel about them, whatever the cost, whatever hell I am sent to in the name of God, because love is the point of all this pain. Love is the meaning. Being caught spying, is not worth dying for. Love is.

As I feel those last seconds tick away, I stare up at the heavens and swear this upon my holy soul to a God I don't believe in and, more importantly, I swear to myself... and Hunter. *Save me and I am yours.*

The birds come out of nowhere.

One moment there is just the fathomless white of forever above us, the next a black cloud of rooks darkens the October sky. I've never seen so many.

At first, I wonder if this is what death comes cloaked in when he claims us, but as they get closer, I hear the noise, the awful cawing screech they make, and I know as they descend toward the arena that this is not a supernatural event destined to end the three of us.

All is chaos. The birds target those with shields and weapons—the guards, the noblemen sitting in the stands, the hangman. But the whole crowd is screaming and charging for the gates, the sounds muffled by a thousand birds' wings beating through the air. I close my eyes as their wing tips brush against my skin, knowing the birds will not harm me, but disliking their proximity all the same.

Hunter is usually so careful with using his gifts. No one but me knows that he can make some creatures do as he bids them.

The cold metal of a blade touches my wrist and my hands are released. Instinct drives me to pull off the noose before turning around to face my rescuer.

Hunter.

Nothing can touch my relief.

“Move,” the command is a teeth-clenched growl.

Poised and hyper alert, he scans the arena. He's in battle mode, so I don't expect any real conversation out of him other than the essential. And my relief, and the urge to act immediately upon my vow and gracelessly throw my arms around him, is tempered by the expression that darkens his face, pulling his full lips into a thin bruise-coloured line. It is an expression I have never seen before, and since we've known one another since we were seven—he the nobleman's son, me the stable boy—that's saying something. Even his wild black curls look more errant than usual, more dragged-through-a-hedge-backward, than simply un-brushed.

Beside me, the boys are struggling with their bonds. Ignoring the warning in Hunter's eyes, I reach down and take the knife from his hand to release them. I watch how they clutch one another, dive fearlessly into the rook-covered ground and run before any of the guards recover and stop them.

Hunter is right; we need to move.

Handing him back his knife, I cautiously crouch and ease myself off the wooden platform, the wound in my shoulder opening with the movement.

“You are injured,” he states, his expression unchanged, though I catch a flash of a much deeper emotion burning in his eyes as they flick over me, checking for severity of injury or weakness.

“It is nothing,” I say, almost without grimacing. And after nearly dying, it really is.

With a slow limp I attempt to disguise as a jog, I follow him across the arena, the birds parting like a black sea before him, the air full of black feathers. Terrified people run past us, others crouch on the ground too fearful to move, the rooks standing guard on their bodies, heads cocked as though they are listening. The birds will not hurt anyone, Hunter would not let them. I can almost feel the hum in the air as they wait for his signal.

“Are you fit to ride?” he asks as we slip out through the gates of the arena and into the town square.

Probably not, I think, moving my shoulder infinitesimally and wincing. But I won't tell him that.

Birds have descended upon the whole town. I look around in wonderment. Not a rooftop nor patch of ground remain uncovered.

Stopping, he flicks his dark eyes over me, brings his fingers to his lips and whistles.

Moments later the ground trembles as Shiva gallops blindly toward us, her head cloaked with sackcloth (his faithful horse likes the birds probably about as much as I do). She pulls up at Hunter's side and obediently drops her head. White sweat stains mar her chestnut coat, typical effects of a hard, fast journey.

With undeniable grace in his strong limbs, Hunter swings himself into the saddle, and seeing I'm not going to be able to do it myself, takes my good hand and grips the leather of my coat and half-drags me up into the saddle behind him. Even though it hurts, I slip my arms around his waist, imagining my fingers brushing against the taut muscles of his stomach beneath his black coat. I breathe deeply, inhaling his familiar scent.

"I have a horse waiting for you at a farm a mile from here," he says.

And we're gone, clattering down the dusty track away from the town.

After half a mile, we slow as Hunter raises one hand dramatically into the air.

Ignoring the pain it takes to do so, I turn and watch the rooks rise up into the sky, their darkness scattering.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Hunter demands, as he paces back and forth in front of me, tension flying off him like sparks from a fire.

God help me, but I want to grab the front of his dirty white shirt and force him up against the barn door, pulling the tension in his body against mine.

But we're at the farm, only a short mile from the town, and we need to be going.

Not to mention my horse is a docile mare Hunter pilfered from some local farmer and she's hardly going to outrun anyone if we're being chased.

"I wasn't thinking, *'Oh yes, today I think I'll get fucking caught'*," I mutter, turning to try and adjust my stirrups one handed.

Hunter sees my difficulty and roughly pushes my hand away to adjust them himself.

I can't work out if this anger he seems to be seething in is because I got caught or because he's had to rescue me—something he's never had to do before.

“You were convicted of *sodomy*,” he spits out the last word as if its taste disgusts him. And a small piece of my heart shrinks in my chest.

“What?” I ask carefully.

I’m puzzled. Yesterday, I was caught spying—which despite being what I *was* doing, didn’t make much sense either—I had done nothing to alert anyone’s attention to me and I had been well hidden in the Tavern’s loft. I do not get caught. I think it’s the main reason Hunter drags me along on these missions.

“Fucking men.”

A wild sounding laugh escapes my lips before I can stop it. He thinks I don’t understand the term he used.

“I *know* what sodomy is. I just don’t understand why they didn’t just hang me for spying, which is what they *caught* me doing!”

He pauses what he’s doing and lays his hands against the saddle, his shoulders sagging as though in defeat. Or relief.

“Why would they lie?” he asks.

And I know he’s not really questioning my integrity but still I say, “Why would I?”

Once my stirrups are adjusted, he boosts me up. There is a moment when the pain from my shoulder is so intense I near welcome the blackness that threatens to take me.

“We’ll rest at Cassandra’s,” he says, mounting Shiva and checking I am upright and able to hold on.

Gritting my teeth, I follow him out of the barn and urge the reluctant mare to a gallop.

Cassandra’s is a large three-roomed, stone house in the woods that lie halfway between the border towns and home. It’s mostly favoured by fugitives, and right now that means us.

We reach the hut by nightfall (just). I am ready to fall off my horse, and my horse in turn is about to collapse to the ground in exhaustion.

Hunter strokes her neck and soothes her, gently removing her saddle and brushing her down, while I lean wearily against a tree.

“Thought I was supposed to be the ‘stable hand,’” I state wryly, enjoying watching Hunter at work, even through my haze of pain.

Hunter flicks his eyes over me but says nothing. At least he’s no longer pissed off.

It’s true, ‘stable hand’ is my official title in the royal court, but it’s been months now since I’ve done anything like just look after horses.

Everything went to hell when the king died, leaving a son too sick to lead. When the rumours of rebellion in the north started, Hunter and his brother, Sylvain, took it upon themselves to find out what was going on. Hunter asked me to go with him on a few missions as a spy. I’m not sure when it turned into a permanent arrangement, but with people disappearing all over the place back at home and everyone wary of a dagger in the back, I’m glad that’s what it’s become.

“I’m sorry I took so long, Mouse,” he says quietly, concentrating on untangling the brambles in the mare’s matted coat and not looking at me.

When anyone else calls me by my childhood name, it sets my teeth on edge—he is the only one I will take it from. The only one who can utter it and set a shiver down my spine, a flare of heat to my groin.

“Sylvain said he was going to be tied up at the castle, and he sent me on a wild goose chase. I was miles away when I got the signal you had been captured... I didn’t think I was going to make it.” He closes his eyes as though the thought causes him pain.

I frown. Sylvain wasn’t tied up at the castle (despite what he might wish); he was in the town. I saw him leaving the Tavern just before they caught me. I’d thought he was perhaps there for more official talks.

I tell Hunter as much, watching as his face goes through a gamut of emotions. He steps toward me across the bracken-covered earth and reaches out, placing his hands on my shoulders. The strength and power I feel emanating off him and the dark scent of his sweat makes my cock twitch. I want him to order me to my knees before him. I want him undone and hard as rock, spit slicked against my lips.

Christ, I’ve got to stop this. But I can barely control the urge to reach up and place my hands over his just to touch him.

“Are you sure it was Sylvain?” he asks, just once.

I nod.

“Then what I did not want to believe may be true. Sylvain is trying to form an alliance with the rebellion. He will let them overthrow our fragile court and take our land for their own so that he will be spared death. He knew you’d be at the Tavern. He set you up,” he says bitterly, before giving me a tight sort of smile and then turning away to let out a roar which sends birds and animals scattering for a quarter of a mile.

“Go rest,” he says when the echoes have finally died away, and waves his hand in the direction of the hut.

I nod, even though I feel like I’m being dismissed and that pisses me off. However different our birthright, our friendship has always been as equals.

Still, I don’t want to leave him alone right now, but there is nothing I can do if I stay.

The hut is freezing. By the wan light of a guttering candle, I start a fire in the grey stone hearth. In the glow of the flames, I boil a shallow pan of water to wash with, and strip off my shirt to check my wounds. My shoulder is a mess from being hit with a barb and dragged from my prison cell. Gently, I finger the inflamed skin, blood still oozes from the cut. It hurts like hell. As carefully as I can, I wash the area with water hotter than I can really stand, hoping this will be enough to start it healing.

Feeling a presence behind me, I turn and find Hunter in the doorway, watching. I look away, at once loving the feel of his eyes on my naked skin and feeling utterly shamed that my heart speeds up for so little.

“Can I see?” he asks, crossing the room and crouching down before me, his eyes full of firelight, full of flickers.

“Fuck,” I hiss, as he grips my upper arm and presses around the wound with his thumb.

His hand is cold and he never was any good at being gentle. Most of the time it is his roughness that turns me on—even now, despite how much it hurts as he explores my injury.

Abruptly, he gets up. “I know what will help,” he says decisively, before swiftly disappearing out the door and into the night.

Now, even though I am turned on by the roughness and readiness of his nature, I doubt Hunter has any clue as to what will help me. And if he's gone to get herbs, well, he has no idea about herbs—the last time he tried to heal me with them, he inadvertently poisoned me and made me sick for days.

But when he doesn't return, I get up from my position by the warm fire, pull my shirt back around my shoulders, and stand in the doorway, looking out into the cold night.

What I see does not surprise me.

Hunter is crouched down on the loamy earth just beyond the doorway, the fingers of one hand against his temple, the other hand flat on the ground, a humming noise coming from deep within his chest. The sound is eerie and yet tuneful, and I feel it call to the animal part of me.

This is how he sends his thoughts out to the creatures that surround us, checking we are safe, that we have not been followed, asking them to watch over us, perhaps. I don't quite know what it is he does or how he even knew he could do it, but he's done it ever since I've known him.

When we were kids, he'd send me messages by making the spiders in the woods spin crazy webs, or field mice spell out words in the yard outside the tiny hut I lived in. When I tried to teach him how to fish, he made all the fish in the stream come to him, and the birds, well the birds have become his guardians, and mine.

But although I know about his gifts, and he knows I know, hence he would not be crouching down and communing so obviously now, we've never really spoken about them—apart from one time. But that time also involved a kiss and we were barely thirteen and I'm pretty certain Hunter has buried that memory somewhere far, far beneath the surface.

“Okay?” I ask him gently, so as not to shock him with my presence as he slowly stands up, scooping the small pile of greenery beside him into his arms.

It always takes him a moment to come back to himself, for his eyes to become warm brown rather than depthless black. Instinctively, I reach out a hand to steady him as he sways, and end up locking my fingers around his wrist. Touching him has always been hard, mostly because I really don't want to stop.

“Sylvain is coming. He is with the rebellion. He knows,” he says quietly, his tone subdued and a little regretful.

It does not surprise me Sylvain would follow us; he wants me dead after all.

“Knows what? That you rescued me?”

“No, I care not that he knows I rescued you. I care that he knows *how* I rescued you, I care that he knows about *me*.” Hunter grimaces. He has no words for what he does and neither do I. “After the spectacle I made today, how could he not?”

“Why does it matter if he knows or not? It makes no difference to anything.” Not now that we are both fugitives, our kingdom on the cusp of rebellion and change.

“No difference?” Hunter hisses angrily, and shakes my hand from his wrist as though it were an afterthought.

It makes me want to grasp him until he looks at me properly, deeply, until he can see that I don't want to fucking let him go and I don't want him to let go of me. But it's thoughts and compulsions like those that get people hung around here—though, since this morning I now believe they are thoughts and compulsions worth dying for. I'm not sure I care any longer about rights and wrongs of the church or the law-makers. Dying for any other cause than the one in my heart is no longer an option.

Perhaps he really does awaken the animalistic part of me, the hidden glow at my core that answers to nothing but the truth in my heart. The thought gives me an intense jolt.

“If the rebellion succeeds, we are both running. Does it matter what it is we are running from?” I ask.

Unexpectedly, his hand comes up to cup my jaw, the contact stopping my breath.

All at once, it is as though the anger has been sucked out of him. I lean into his touch, feeling the effects of it thrumming through my muscles. “The stakes are higher now, Mouse. They will try me for necromancy or worse, and you as my accomplice. They will torture us, and I cannot see you die like that.”

Hesitantly, I bring my hand up, mirroring his gesture, my thumb stroking the rough stubble of his cheek, his nose, his lips. My heart feels as if it is about to burst right out of my chest.

“Then we will not let them catch us.”

The darkness brings with it cold winds that search out the pockets of warmth in the house's empty rooms and banishes them with howls and eerie whispers.

Hunter has been in the chamber opposite mine for hours, and I cannot wait any longer. I made a vow. If Sylvain is coming, we do not have long left—whether we leave now and run, or we stay and fight.

I murmur his name as I open the door to the chamber.

“I don't want to be alone tonight,” I say, closing the door behind me.

Hunter is sitting on the cold floor, his head in his hands. At my words he looks up, his expression again one I cannot decipher.

“You would do better without my company,” he says softly.

Paranoia makes me check that the chamber door is closed, the lock turned, before I slowly unbutton the thin shirt I put back on to stop the chill of the evening air gusting around this draughty place. I dressed my wound and applied a few of the herbs I recognised earlier, but it is still painful.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his eyes watching the descent of my fingers.

“If you deny this is what you want, I will not believe you.”

My voice is shaking because despite my words I *do* expect him to deny it. I expect him to throw me out of the chamber whether he wants this or not. I'm taking a risk. And I have no idea whether it will pay off.

“It does not matter what I want.” He runs a hand through his thick curls. Curls I want to press my cheek against as he holds me close, curls I want to breathe in, feel against my lips. “What I want is for you to be safe, and with me you are not.”

“I would be dead without you.”

“You almost *died* this morning.” I cannot miss the anguish in his voice, nor the way he is looking at me as I shrug out of the shirt, letting it drop on the cold stone floor. Earlier I was shirtless because I was dealing with my injury, but now he must know this is for him.

“Why are you fighting for a cause you no longer believe in?” I ask him, looking deeply into his eyes as I push down the loose pants I put on after cleansing myself.

I do not miss the flicker of his gaze as he takes in the jut of my cock, the way it is straining for him. Only him.

“What do you want, Mouse?” he whispers.

Can he not see?

“I want to be yours,” I say, self-consciously walking across the room to stand before him. It’s the only thing I’ve ever wanted. “I would do your will, if you were to command me.”

“Why now?” he asks, making no move to get up, though his eyes take their fill of my body.

He is not refusing me, but neither is he reaching out to me with anything other than his eyes.

My heart feels heavy in my chest. My cock begins to flag as my bravado nosedives.

“In the arena, I thought I was going to die. In those last seconds I made a vow for whatever was left of my life and into the next, to show those I cared for how I felt. To no longer be a coward. The boys who were to be hung beside me were not cowards.” I stop, and take a deep breath. “And every single second since then I have felt the pull of my promise. I cannot... I do not *want* things to go on as they are between us. I am not just your friend, Hunter.”

Hunter looks away. “This is just a reaction to near dying. You feel like you need someone to prove you are still alive.”

I sink to my knees.

“Are you blind? Or... or do you not want me?” I have to know, even though I suspect the truth may sting more than a blade through the heart.

“You said you would not believe me if I denied this is what I want,” he says, turning his head away.

“Maybe I would not want to believe it, because I... But if... if that is the truth then...”

Why is it so hard to speak the words in my heart? It is like torture.

“It’s been ten years since you kissed me. Do you remember?” he asks, and when he looks at me, I glimpse the boy he once was, innocent and bold and completely unaware of the effect he had on me.

Do I remember? I think about it every day. But those words refuse to be spoken.

“Yes,” I say instead, and I cannot help but smile a little remembering the day—Hunter’s shocked expression when I pressed my lips against his as we tumbled onto the ground after a game of chase. How he melted against me among the fallen leaves, his arms coming around my back to hold me close, and how that in turn shocked and elated me.

But it was over before it began—we thought we heard someone following in the woods. Hunter panicked and used his gifts to see if anyone really was there, but I don’t think he was as experienced as he is now. I watched how his eyes grew dark and the sound came out of him and I was a little afraid. After he came back to himself, we talked about it a little and he’d tried to show me, teach me how to concentrate and send out my senses, to connect with the *other*. But of course I could not.

And somehow we never spoke of it again after that, and it was as though the kiss never happened.

But he remembered. All these years, he remembered. He didn’t bury it.

“I wanted to kiss you again, but there was never a right moment,” I say, dipping my head at the admission. Embarrassed. Talk of fucking would not have me as undone as these words do.

Perhaps there will never be a right moment. Perhaps the right moment is just the one you have available to you.

I lean toward him, watching carefully for any refusal, for any hint that this is not what he wants. I am not bold, or innocent, and I try not to think too hard about any effects I may be having in case there are none. Using my hand against his shoulder to steady myself, I close my eyes and brush my lips gently against his. My blood sings at the contact. I run my tongue against his bottom lip and feel a tremor pass through him, as though he is holding himself back and it is taking a great deal of effort.

When I pull back, his eyes are dark as night. He swipes his thumb across my mouth—so rough and unexpected—it makes me jump.

Sucking the same thumb into his mouth, he smiles sadly, his expression intense.

“I made a vow too, back when I was thirteen. I promised that I would care for a boy who was my friend. I promised I would do nothing to jeopardise his

safety, which included acting upon any... what I'd been told were *unnatural* feelings I had for him."

Oh.

"I wanted to fuck you as soon as I knew what fucking was. But there would have been *consequences*..." There is a fire in his eyes as he speaks, an intensity I have never seen before.

I do not know what to say or do, I can only look at him in the stunned silence.

"Fuck the consequences. We are beyond them now," I whisper eventually, finding my voice, needing to say something, and not caring if it is the right thing. And maybe he's right, there is desperation to it, a need to prove I am alive, but he is the only one I want to prove that with.

All the air seems to have been sucked out of the room, leaving us in a breathless vacuum. He is calling to me, I can feel it. I want it, his control; I want to lose myself in it. I want to let go.

We have known one another for forever, but when Hunter looks at me like he is now, I feel I know nothing, that this part of him has been hidden from me. Until now.

I give myself over to it, rolling my head back at his suggestion, exposing my throat, my chest, my cock—the sensation has me as hard as the rock that makes up this house.

I lie back on the hut's cold stone floor and watch as he crawls over me, like a predator with its prey. One handed, he loosens the lacing of his trousers, exposing the blushed tip of his cock to the cold whispery air. God I want to touch him, taste him, but my arms are pinned in place above my head and he holds himself above me, not quite letting our bodies touch. He closes my eyes with his will and opens them for me again. Holds my balls in the palm of his calloused hand and strokes them gently, then squeezes until I can hardly breathe. I have no idea how he knows what this touch does to me, perhaps he has watched me masturbate.

I trust him beyond anything to let him play like this.

Leaning down, he nips my jaw. "Kiss me, Mouse," he murmurs, and I hear the words inside my head as he brushes our open mouths together, wanting to keep him this close always.

It is clumsy and rough but I would not want it any other way. With one hand pulling my hair, the other clawing my backside, the force of his desire jolts through me. His control is wavering as he collapses, dark eyed and wanting, to jerkily thrust his hips against mine. We rut like animals, wild and desperate. His cock is still sheathed by the coarse material of his trousers, and though I long to feel the heat of his skin, the friction near tips me over the edge.

Breathing hard, he slows it down. He was close, I can tell by the flush colouring his face and neck, the light sheen of sweat on his skin.

“Are you mine?” he whispers roughly, pushing himself up, looking at me as though there is nothing else worthy of his attention on this earth.

“Always,” I gasp.

The heat of his gaze is hotter than the fire on my shivering skin. He touches my thigh and I let my legs lift and fall open, exposing myself to him. My cock leaks clear sticky fluid against my stomach, which I know from experience tastes saltier than cum. Hunter traces the fluid with his finger, before rubbing it around my asshole, then pushes his finger inside, quickly adding a second.

“*Please,*” I groan. Not sure what I’m asking, only that my mind is telling me from everything I’ve been taught that this invasion is wrong, and yet, God help me, I want more of it. I want to spread myself wide, pull him deeper and deeper inside.

I lick his palm and he spits against the wetness before opening his trousers wide and slicking his thick cock. I prop myself up on my elbows to watch, fascinated at how different he is from me. I’ve seen plenty of limp dicks over the years, but very few hard ones. His cock is thick and straight, a dusky obelisk rising from a forest of tight black curls. He spits again against my asshole, the heat of him burning as, grasping my thighs he pushes slowly inside me.

It hurts. Hunter must see the pain on my face, as, muscles trembling, he stops. My muscles want to push him out, he’s too big, he’s never going to *fit... but, God, the thought of him trying...*

I groan, willing myself to relax and take him. Without pushing deeper, he rocks his hips, withdraws a little, gives a few shallow thrusts, cups my balls, kisses me.

“More,” I gasp, beginning to unravel, beginning to want the pain because the burn is starting to feel so fucking good.

As though sensing I have given him permission, Hunter lets go, driving deep, and sucking my tongue into his mouth.

The world breaks down to a realm of sensation, of taste and touch. I want nothing to break the spell we have created, I want this moment to be forever and we, immortal.

But distantly, I am aware of an owl's call as it echoes through the wood that surrounds us, loud and haunting as the tolling of a bell.

Immediately, Hunter tenses above me, his hand gripping my hip in alarm.

The spell is broken.

Something is wrong.

He withdraws too quickly, leaving me bereft.

"Get dressed," he whispers urgently, his eyes wide. "Someone is close. I thought we'd have more time than this."

Frustrated as hell, I shift away from him to drag on my pants and shirt, cursing that I left the sturdy shoes Hunter found for me at the farm, in the other room.

If we have been followed this far, they must have been travelling through the night, which means they must know these woods well. They must know Cassandra's.

We are *fucked*. Fuck.

Hurriedly slinging his coat on, Hunter grabs his short blade (a tool used for skinning animals when we are on the road), stamps on the fire in the hearth and makes for the front door. I am still fiddling with the buttons of my stupid shirt and searching for my shoes, but I know he has to be outside to do his thing, he has to be touching the earth to talk to it—or touching that which he wants to command (like me). For a surreal second I wonder if he can talk to plants too or if it is just animals.

Shoes on, shirt and coat half done up, I creep outside after him, nearly tripping over his crouching form a few meters beyond the door. Staring blinding into the trees, and wondering how many are out there coming for us, I hunker down next to him, feeling weirdly protected by the humming noise he's making.

When the noise dies away, I know he is coming back to himself and I press in close, knowing he will whisper what he knows in my ear that way. Plus, my

frustration has not quite ebbed away and the need to be close to him is like an unquenched thirst.

“Sixteen, on foot, a few hundred meters away to the west. Sylvain is not one of them. There is a camp half a mile away in a clearing, a hundred men.”

“All for us?” I ask, a little awed, fear clenching like a fist in my stomach.

But Hunter shakes his head, his hair brushing my cheek. “We are just the beginning.”

“We need to go,” I say, when Hunter makes no attempt to move, despite what he’s just told me. We have no chance against so many. I don’t understand why he is not moving.

“If we leave without the horses, we will have no chance on foot in the light of day,” he says heavily.

“Then we bring the horses.”

“And crash through the undergrowth with them, alerting the rebels to our position?” I know exactly the look Hunter is giving me, and I look away, into the dark... where something flickers...

With a quick jab, I elbow him in the ribs. “Over there!” I hiss.

A torch, just visible through the trees, weaves its way toward us.

“Stay here.” Hunter’s words are like a punch to my gut and I realise with shock he’s just pushed his will onto me. I try and get up, go after him, but I can’t, it’s like struggling with impossibly heavy, invisible bonds. He’s commanded me to stay and I can do nothing else.

Unable to move from my crouch on the ground, I curse him over and over in my head. I’m so fucking angry. I gave him my trust and he’s overstepped the mark. I am his but I did not consent to being held back while he goes it alone and gets himself in trouble.

Sucking in air through my nose and blowing it out my mouth, I will myself to calm down.

All is silent now. I strain my ears but I can hear nothing, see nothing but a few shadows cast by the light of the cloud-covered moon. The torch has vanished, though my eyes burn with searching it out in the darkness.

That is the direction Hunter would have gone.

The wind whispers the dry leaves together and all at once the weight pinning me in place is lifted and I can move. But now I am gripped by fear, fear that Hunter has been captured or hurt and that is why he has released me. My heart is hammering so loud I'm afraid whoever is coming for us can hear it. I'm forcing myself to think—I need to think—when a hand grips my arm and drags me back toward the stone wall of the house. The contact does not shock me; somehow I know it's Hunter without having to see him.

“One down. The rest are close,” he breathes, his lips against my ear.

“Don't *ever* hold me back like that again,” I hiss, angrily.

Awkwardly, he reaches down and squeezes my hand. The gesture is so unlike him I swallow my next words.

“Be angry with me later, right now we need to concentrate on staying alive,” he says.

There is movement, close by. Too close. Hunter must have been too distracted to notice. Some compulsion drives me to step in front of him and when the stick comes down it thuds against my good shoulder and I just react on instinct. My fist connecting with a jaw I can barely see and punching again until I hear a body hit the ground with a delayed yelp.

Hunter is by my side in a heartbeat, checking if the body I've knocked out is still breathing, as I shake out my aching knuckles and wince at the pain from what was my *good* shoulder.

His feral grin looms at me out of the darkness, all teeth. There has to be a word for a look like that, and if there is, it would definitely be a criminal offense in the eyes of every church and government I've ever known.

“I've never seen you punch like that,” he whispers.

But before I can bask in the glow of his praise, the night air cracks with movement, and torchlight drifts between the trees.

Hunter grabs my hand again and now we run.

This time we head away from the house, deeper into the woods, Hunter guided by whatever it is he's guided by and me following.

Out of breath, and all but out of adrenaline (which is the only thing that has kept me going thus far), we rest by the jagged stump of what I imagine was once a magnificent oak. The trunk of the great tree rots in the undergrowth behind us, covered in moss and nettles. This deep in the woods everything smells damp and earthy and I fill my lungs with it, the scent comforting.

“Where are we going?” I ask between breaths, trying to ignore the sharp pains shooting down my arm and across my chest from my wound. It must have opened up again, but I have not the will to tighten the dressing right now.

“I don’t know. We were surrounded and they were closing in, we just... we just need to keep going. I set Shiva and the mare free. Hopefully, I will be able to call to them when light returns.”

Above us the sky has cleared, and I can see stars glittering like dust motes in the blackness.

“You were right, Mouse. We should have just run.” Hunter’s breath is still laboured, whereas mine is deepening and slowing... it is as though he is injured. The thought is like a shard of ice in my heart.

“No, I was speaking out of fear,” I say as I step in close to him, still barely able to make out his form, and stroke my hand across his back. If he’s injured I need to find out where and how bad. When my hand reaches his left side, he lets out a strangled yelp.

“What happened?” I ask softly, my fingers doing a slow dance under his thick coat, against his shirt, trying to work out the extent of his injury.

“A blade,” he wheezes breathlessly, and my blood runs cold. I want to yell and punch something else, something more yielding and breakable than the jaw of a faceless rebel. Instead, I close my eyes and grit my teeth.

“Deep?”

He doesn’t answer. But he gasps when my fingers press against the wound, and when I bring my hand away it is slick and black with blood. The scent of it is like that of a slain animal.

Jesus.

We need to stop the bleeding.

“Sit,” I say, placing my hands on his shoulders and gently guiding him toward the ground. Surprisingly, he does as he is bid. I would rather have him

snarl and fight me. I would rather have him look at me as if I am making an unnecessary fuss than as though he needs me to be the one to take charge.

Shrugging out of my coat, I pull off my filthy shirt, twist it flat and sink down next to him to wrap it tightly around his waist, under his coat. He flicks his eyes away from me, barely holding back a groan of pain. I can almost feel the fight leaking out of him.

The shifting of the wind through the trees has an ominous feel, as if whoever is following us is closing in, fast.

We need to hide. We could be found at any moment and I would have little success defending us. *Help me on this*, I silently plead.

In the distance, I hear the baying howls of pack animals—hunting dogs. They must be from the camp. Their howls are warped by the wind, distorted by distance. But the distance will soon be gone.

Maybe it is better this way. They will make the end quick, and Hunter's fear of prolonged torture will be unfounded if we are to be torn apart by animals. But then again, if Hunter is alive he won't let that happen, he will just turn those dogs around.

If it was me, perhaps I'd turn those dogs on their owners, but Hunter would never use an animal to hurt someone, would never manipulate for harm or waste a life like that. He holds life sacred. All life. Even that of his brother (even though Sylvain tried to kill me), this is perhaps why it hurts him so.

Quiet footsteps step through the bracken, so close. I can scarcely breathe.

"They are surrounding us," Hunter wheezes, and I grip his hand.

If I go, it is with his hand in mine. If I go, it is by his side.

The burning light of a torch weaves its way between the trees ahead. I turn my head and see another to the right, and another. A weird sort of calm washes through me, even though I'm scared as hell—I am exhausted. This is it. We have no strength to run.

When the ground around us begins to shake, I think at first it is an earth tremor, sometimes around here they are strong enough to knock down buildings, but then I hear Hunter humming, his head resting against his chest and I know he is using the last of his strength to help us, that somehow the earth is trembling because he asked it to.

“Hold your breath,” he whispers suddenly and pulls me close, his arm around my chest.

I barely have a chance to do as he asks when the earth comes up and swallows me.

Us.

His hand is still in mine, though I am no longer on my feet, and the sky is no longer above me, just the richly packed earth, so pungent and spidery dark, full of the tiny white roots of the forest plants. But there is space around me, air flowing freely, and if I turn my head, I can see a tiny patch of moon-dark sky through the gnarled dead roots of the fallen oak up on the forest floor.

We are underground, far, far beneath the rotting tree stump.

There is enough space to sit, my head pushing against the earth, enough space for me to lean over and desperately tend to Hunter's trembling form. Such a move must have taken a lot out of him, and I have no idea how he managed to pull us down into the earth and create such a perfect hollow.

Footsteps crunch through the bracken above, then voices, though they are too muffled for me to hear what they are saying. They must have been certain they had us. Fuck, that was so close.

I press my forehead against his shoulder and curl around his unhurt side.

“It'll be okay, Mouse. We're safe here. Sleep now,” he whispers.

And I know I shouldn't, I should stay awake and watch him. I should be strong and watch over both of us, keep us safe. But no strength on Earth can keep my eyes open, and I blink out like a snuffed candle flame and fall at once into a deep and dreamless sleep.

A thin shaft of light warms my skin. I blink, and immediately sneeze, inhaling the scent of earth and wood, my skin covered in a light coating of fine soil.

Beside me Hunter is still. For a moment my heart stops, then his chest rises and falls and I close my eyes again in relief.

Trying to be careful not to wake him, I reach over and lay my hand against his forehead to check he is not burning up with a fever. Thankfully, he is not.

Sleepily, he frowns as I withdraw my hand, and his brown eyes blink open. His expression is confused and wary.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you,” I murmur.

“Come here.” He groans holding out his arm, a flash of pain screwing up his features for a second.

And even though my shoulder is hurting and Hunter is barely concealing his pain, I come into his arms, resting my head against his shoulder, the thud of his heart vibrating through me.

Whatever happens, wherever we go, wherever this weird place we are in right now, in his arms like this, I am home.

We rest like that, sleeping fitfully in one another’s arms until the sun casts no more light on us. At nightfall, despite Hunter’s protests and the fact my whole arm is stiff and painful, I make a sloping tunnel to the surface. It’s slow going but we need food and water, and a candle would be a Godsend so I can check our wounds, but I’m not sure I can make it back to Cassandra’s, and I promised Hunter I wouldn’t try to. I lay within the mouth of the tunnel for half an hour, listening for movement in the forest.

Fear clenches inside me as I crawl out the tunnel and look around. For a moment, all is silent. The rebels must have carried on, given up on finding us. I almost let my guard down a little when a series of sharp cracks, like running footsteps, fractures the fragile peace. My heart near seizes. The ground vibrates, and I desperately seek out the attacker who will fell me.

But it doesn’t come.

Instead, Shiva butts me in the back and snorts heartily. *Fucking horse!*

She has her saddle on, though it has spun around so it is against her stomach and the saddle bags, full of our supplies, are trailing against the ground. I don’t know whether to hug her or hold my head in my hands and weep.

Holding my bad arm across my chest, I unbuckle the girth, letting the saddle drop to the floor.

“Good girl. Thank you,” I whisper, giving her a pat and quick one-armed hug before picking up both saddle bags and slipping back down the poorly constructed tunnel, hoping the walls won’t cave in on me.

The moonlight provides a scant illumination, but it is better than nothing.

“You called Shiva didn’t you?” I say upon reaching the hollow, and marvelling at how perfectly intact the walls are down here, Hunter must still be using energy to keep it this way, to keep the earth from piling in and burying us within it.

“Didn’t want you trying to make it to Cassandra’s in the dark,” Hunter says, stiffly sitting himself up.

“I promised you I wouldn’t,” I say wryly, wondering about the trust that seems to be in doubt here.

But the fact that we’re having this conversation tells me Hunter is not as seriously hurt as I feared last night.

Blindly, I feel around in the saddle bag until I find a candle with the tinder box and the flint and steel lighter.

I light a small fire then the candle, Hunter watching.

“I’m glad I’m here with you,” he says eventually.

“You’d not rather be back at the castle then?” I snort, reckoning there is no doubt he would be washed and clean and in comfortable surroundings.

But perhaps there is no castle for us any longer. The thought is sobering.

I heat a pan of water, and silently we check our wounds. Hunter’s is a deep gouge above his hip, but more a flesh wound than a serious stab wound.

“What are we doing, Hunter?” I don’t mean to say the words out loud. I don’t expect his answer is the one I want to hear.

“Waiting them out. They have more pressing matters than hunting us down, but we don’t want to draw them back—”

“No, I mean, are we heading back to the castle? Because...” I sigh. “That doesn’t seem wise.”

In the flickering light I can feel his dark eyes watching me pensively, but I don’t meet his gaze. “We could head south, maybe pay for passage on one of the ships sailing out to the new world...”

Who am I fucking kidding? He’ll never agree to that. It sounds like I am suggesting we run, but it’s not running, it’s choosing a different path. I doubt he will see it that way though.

Hunter’s gaze is steady as he waits for me to finish what I have to say.

“I don’t agree with their motives, but maybe the rebellion should succeed,” I press on. After listening in on many a hushed conversation, spying for Hunter and his brother, I can see both sides of this fight. “Maybe it is time to let the people choose how they want to be led.” I say this all very carefully, aware that despite the way Hunter has always treated me, there is a huge divide in our status. Though he is now an orphan, he was born to a rich and important family and he has everything to lose. Whereas, I have nothing. Except him.

“You are suggesting we abandon our kingdom to rebels.”

I suppose I am.

“One man’s rebel is another man’s saviour. One man’s fugitive is another man’s friend...” I add with a self-conscious shrug.

“Not just a friend.” He looks at me openly, his expression unguarded, every defence laid down.

“I’m glad Sylvain set me up. I’m glad of that noose around my neck,” I say, wanting to touch the shadows of his face, to prove that he’s real, that this is real. The reality of what happened gives me a terrible sense of relief and a vision of what might have been had Hunter been too late.

“I’m not glad about any of that.” He sighs heavily, the sound so like that of the wind gusting through the woods above. “Our kingdom is everything I have ever known, Mouse.”

Sadness wells up in his eyes, and my heart aches. For him, for me, for whatever decision we make. But I squeeze his fingers with the quiet realisation that this is a decision I want us to make together.

After placing the candle on the ground, near enough that it casts its warm light on his face, I lay at his side. My place in all this.

“The things that you do Hunter, I’ve never known or heard of anyone else able to do them. A long time ago you told me there were others... maybe we should find them...?”

Hunter looks away. “Stories I read in a book, that is all,” he says quietly.

“But perhaps they’re not just stories, perhaps you were given those gifts for a reason. Perhaps for something important...”

“Something more important than fighting for my home, something more courageous than running like a coward?” he whispers, rolling on top of me, oh so careful of our injuries.

“Yes,” I say, my heart beating against his. “You hate fighting. You can’t bear to truly hurt someone, it wounds you.”

I’ve longed to tell him this, to tell him I know him so deeply, so well. And yet as I gaze at him, I am reminded yet again, that I know nothing.

The air is so still, the candlelight so steady, it is as though time has stuttered and stopped.

I don’t realise I am holding my breath until he kisses me, until I have to inhale, and draw in the musky scent of his skin with a chest-deep groan.

Almost painfully, his fingers thread through my hair, tilting my head back, exposing my throat, which he roughly strokes as he would an animal.

But he doesn’t let me touch him, not yet.

My need grows with each touch of his tongue against mine, exploring my mouth as no other has.

Deftly, he strips off my clothes. He sits up, looks at the shadow and light on my skin, traces the candlelight’s flickers. I’m beginning to see he likes me naked before him while he is still clothed. He swallows audibly, watching the way my cock lifts as he strokes my sides, the tension he causes in my muscles when he traces the seam of my balls. He smiles to hear the sounds I make as I try not to cry out. I think he wants me to cry out, to know he is the cause of my loss of control, as I wish to know I am the cause of his.

I follow his eyes, his mouth on my skin.

“Please take off your clothes,” I murmur, when I can stand the teasing no longer.

Quick as sunlight, he complies, lifting his shirt awkwardly over his head and unlacing his trousers. He allows me a moment to run my hand across his chest, through the thick hair there, across the curve of his muscles, the dark pebbles of his nipples, down, down, down, to the slicked wet tip of his cock, eager as an excited animal.

Wary of hurting my shoulder, I sit up and lean forwards, flicking my tongue around his foreskin and against his slit, feeling him tremble and wanting a little taste of him before I let him fuck me, because that is what he is going to do.

Faster than I expect, he pulls me up onto my knees and turns me around, so I am facing away from him. I brace my hands half way down the crumbling

wall as he steadies me further with an arm around my chest and roughly thrusts two fingers inside me and then replaces them with the burning heat of his cock. Now I cry out, pushing back against him, against the intensity and the pain, until he is buried deep within me.

For a moment we pause, adjusting to the sensations of one another, his will so tangled with mine it is as though I can feel the pleasure he's feeling, the delicious hot pressure of my body around his cock.

With every touch I feel so alive, every point of contact our skin makes is like the bright map of the stars scattered across the heavens.

Groaning, he starts to move, pulling out and slamming back. It's not gentle, but I never wanted it to be. Letting him hold me up, I grip my fist around my cock and pull on it in time to his thrusts, my orgasm building like a fire blazing through my senses.

Hunter comes first, biting down on my shoulder as he squeezes me tight, his cock pulsing so hard inside me, my nerves thrum and my body jerks as my own orgasm follows on the tail of his. The intensity stops all thought, there is just feeling, all-consuming and a little terrifying in its brilliance. I grip onto Hunter, blindly searching for his mouth, his lips, his tongue.

Spent and exhausted, we collapse against the earth, Hunter blowing out the candle and dragging our clothes around us to act as a blanket.

"This is all I need," I whisper inside our cocoon, his wonderful chest hair curling against my nose. "If you want to return to the castle in the morning, we will do it hand in hand." Just so he knows, if I have to die, it will be by his side, as his lover.

For a while, he is silent but for the deep hush of his breath. I wonder if he is sleeping and I begin to let the sleepy tangles of darkness pull me to their depths.

"You're more important to me than that, Mouse. *This* is more important to me."

I blink my eyes open.

"I am home when I am with you. I do not want to lose you in some pointless fight," he continues and sighs.

At his words, I push myself up on my elbows, and look into the gleaming darkness of his eyes.

“Then we leave this place, this kingdom?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says simply.

We talk no further but sleep does not claim me straight away. There is so much left for me to know, but as time ticks a heaven around the stars, I know the possibilities are, for once, endless.

The End

Author's Note

“Time ticks a heaven around the stars” is borrowed in part from the poem *The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower* by Dylan Thomas

Author Bio

A newly published author with Dreamspinner Press and Harmony Ink Press, Suki Fleet currently lives in the heart of England. Her childhood was quite unconventional and she spent some time living on a boat and travelling at sea with her family. Since she was very small she has always dreamed of writing for a living, but although she has written original fiction online for years and encouraged many new writers to keep going and follow their author dreams, it is only recently she got the courage to make her own dream a reality and actually send something off to a publisher.

By day she runs her own business selling fabric (her second love) and juggling family commitments, by night she weaves the stories that the characters in her head dictate. These stories often start with pain or longing but always end with love.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Tumblr](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Website](#)

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A MILLION TRUTHS

By MC Houle

Photo Description

Two brunet men on a bed. The younger one is on his knee, eyes closed. He looks content to let the other man kiss his belly.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I was always considered a geek in high school, luckily my best friend older brother always looked out for me and I was never afraid. This is why when I pick a collage I picked his. But this summer before starting school I came out to my family and best friend, and everyone rejected me. Now I am scared that the guy that I looked up to and felt safe with all my life will also reject me when I get to collage. Please tell me what happens when I get to school, and how this scene happened.

While I like a slow burn, I enjoy it getting very hot a one point. I also like HEA.

Sincerely,

Nadine

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: coming out, homophobia, college students, athlete, geeks/nerds, friends to lovers

Word Count: 9,344

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A MILLION TRUTHS

By MC Houle

Chapter 1

I flexed my knee at the correct angle on my skateboard, when I noticed Ryan Beaulieu stretching in his front yard. His white T-shirt with the large red-and-yellow dinosaur from the University of Calgary's team logo moulded the form of his every muscle. My feet knocked on each other, and I crashed to the street. Of course, he looked up at that exact moment. He flashed his now brace-free teeth at me as if I hadn't just made a fool of myself. I jumped back on my skateboard. I wanted to prove I wasn't a dork, but as I attempted my jump again, he stretched back. His T-shirt slid up and gave me a sweet view of his belly. My eyes lingered at the dark happy trail, and I missed my jump again. This time, I landed on my feet, my board knocking on the sidewalk at Ryan's house. I jogged to it, embarrassed.

Ryan leaned on his elbows and watched me approach. He had to know I had done those jumps a million times. He stood as I got there, stretching his arms in the air, giving me a closer look at his belly. *Damn his lower ab muscles were defined.*

"Aaron."

The way he said my name, low and sweet. I forced my eyes away.

"I wouldn't mind the company," he said.

"I'm not really a runner." *Lame.*

"Too bad."

Say something, damn it. "I can always skate."

He smiled at me. As he jogged away from his house, I followed suit.

"I didn't know you ran."

"Not my favourite activity, but I gotta stay in shape for next season."

"As if you could ever not be in shape," I blurted. *I was such a dork!*

"Well, thanks. But the Dinos' coach is intense and the program is competitive. If I can't compete with the new players, I'll end up on the bench which means losing a big part of my scholarship."

"But you had a great first season, right?"

"You watched?"

“Sometimes.” *Every. Fucking. Game.* “It’s a shame you lost that last game against the Golden Bears.”

“Didn’t your stepfather play for them?”

“Don’t tell him I wanted the Dinos to win.”

Would he ever think of me as anything other than his little brother’s best friend?

“Your secret is safe with me.”

Everything of mine was safe with Ryan Beaulieu. I still remember the first time I really talked to the guy. Grade seven. Tall and thin with a geeky side, I was the bullies’ favourite victim. And then came Ryan Beaulieu, grade nine hotshot to the rescue. Last time I was ever bullied. After a while, we let the discussion draw out, but even in the silence, something about Ryan made me feel good about myself.

After some kilometers of jogging and skating on Main, we went back to his front yard. He had rounds of sweat under his arms and on his back; he shouldn’t be this sexy in such a state. His muscles contracted when he removed his shirt and wiped his face with it. I needed a lot of self-control not to reach and touch. Couldn’t force my eyes away.

“I’m going to take a shower. It was good seeing you again.”

I ran to the house next door. My stepfather and mother were at the table eating toast. They asked if I wanted some, but I told them I wanted to shower first. The erection I was sporting wasn’t conducive to breakfast with the folks.

It was still too early for any of my friends to be awake yet, but Geoff was most likely connected to *Blood Arrows*. I made sure my door was closed and my parents gone for work, and I turned on the Xbox.

Geoff was the only person who knew I was gay. We’d met through the game, where his handle of SuperGayF647 outed him. I had gotten the brief courage to ask for a private game, and we became fast friends. Eventually I told him I thought I was gay, even though I knew I was at the time. He had been one of the only people who really knew me, and with whom I could really be myself. It was a pleasant novelty.

“He’s back,” I said, as the ranger elf I played shot an arrow into an orc’s eye.

“You’re gonna have to be clearer on who’s back.”

“Ryan Beaulieu.”

One more arrow.

“That’s your lifelong crush, right?” Geoff’s sorcerer created a hole in the ground to separate most of the orcs from us.

“Yeah. I didn’t think he could get sexier. I almost couldn’t stop drooling when we talked this morning.”

“But you did talk. It’s better than nothing.”

And one more arrow through an orc.

“Made a fool of myself, for sure.”

“You think he’s gay?”

An orc was getting closer to the sorcerer.

“Never.”

I shot.

“You asked?”

“No.”

The orc fell down.

“Then you don’t know for sure,” Geoff said as he bewitched the fallen orc.

“Owen keeps talking about how many girls Ryan’s banging at Uni. He’s straight, or I would’ve heard of it.”

We passed some time with comments, mostly about the game, until the last orc fell. “Have you given it more thought?”

“I can’t think of anything else. I’m going to do it, but I just need to figure out how.”

“The hardest part.”

“How did you do it?”

“I didn’t. My father caught me making out with Thom. I can tell you, that is the worst fucking way. My father came to accept it with time, but he still can’t look my boyfriend in the eyes. But I guess it would have been the same if Thom had been a she.”

“That’s awful.”

“If I can give you any advice, do it if and when you are ready. Otherwise, you’ll regret it.”

“Don’t I know that? I just don’t want to get to the university and get stuck pretending still.”

We stole from the dead orcs and played some more until Geoff had to leave. We said our good-byes, and from wherever he was in their apartment, Thom yelled his good-byes too.

I was light-headed after the honesty of the discussion. I wished I could feel like this every day.

Owen texted me about a sick party to celebrate our friend turning eighteen, and the weight of lying came back to haunt me.

I still texted him I would be there. Maybe tonight I would be able to get it over with.

I stumbled outside the bar. The fresh air cleared my mind a bit. India followed me outside.

“Are you okay?”

I closed my eyes, her sweet voice scorching my hearing, the memory of her kiss mixing with the one too many beers. I felt the urge to throw up.

“I’m fine. Tell the others I’m going home.”

She made a step toward me, pressed her palm on my chest. “You sure you don’t want something else?”

I stepped back.

“You don’t have to look so disgusted,” she said, and I knew I hurt her.

“It’s nothing against you. Just drank too much, you know?” I moved away from her without waiting for an answer. I thought she would follow, but she didn’t.

Coming out to Owen hadn’t gone exactly like I thought it would. At first, he was surprisingly accepting, until we got to the club and he thrust all the girls my way. To fix me, he said. Even used the term faggot. I shivered at the thought.

I wasn't expecting a "happy coming-out party", but he was the one person I thought would still be my friend. Obviously, I was wrong.

I've always been on his side, even when no one else was.

I was walking home when I heard footsteps behind me. I turned to see Owen running after me. He looked a lot like his brother, but I had never felt an attraction to him. At the moment, anger was making him uglier.

"What are you doing?"

"Going home."

"India was all over you. You could have tapped that."

"You do know the meaning of gay, right?" *Twice I'd said the word today; it was easier every time.*

"Oh come on, stop with that old joke."

"You don't believe me."

"I would know if you were like them. We wouldn't be friends if you were."

"Then I guess we're not."

I walked away, shaking. He grabbed my shoulder and turned me to him. His fist moved as if to hit me. I moved away again.

"You don't want a fag for a friend, well I'm one. Pretty self-explanatory."

"Come on, dude!" he screamed as I got away. "You are not gay!"

"Next time you say shit like that, I'm Frenching you!"

I wouldn't have, but it did shut him up. When I turned to see what he was doing, he was walking back to the bar. Tears burned my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I sent a text to Geoff knowing he wouldn't see it until I was well in bed. I could call my mother so she'd get me, but then I'd have to explain to her what I was doing so far from the club. Which would bring out more questions I didn't want to answer. Besides, it wasn't like my house was all that far.

When I finally got to my street, Ryan was leaving the house, keys in hand. He looked surprised to see me.

"You're not with O?"

"I left early."

“You could have called. I would have driven you home, even without O. Anyway, I’ll be jogging tomorrow same time, if you’re awake and... Well, you’re invited.”

“Thanks.”

He got into his car, and I went into my house. All the lights were off, and I went to bed without waking anyone up.

I didn’t fall asleep quickly, bothered by what had happened. No doubt Ryan’s invitation would be revoked once Owen told him about me. I woke up too late to know for sure, but come on, a jock like him wouldn’t be taking too nicely to having a guy fantasizing about him.

Instead of going outside, I connected to the game and found Geoff. I told him what had happened. He assured me not everyone would react that way and distracted me. Thom even joined in the talk.

My phone sang Owen’s ringtone, but I ignored it. Instead, Geoff, Thom, and I joined our forces to break into a castle and save the princess and her treasures. When my mother screamed lunch was ready, my troubles came back to mind.

“I think I’m going to wait before coming out to my parents.”

“Like I said, do it when you’re ready.”

“Listen to him. You want to be able to look your future in-laws in the eyes.”

I laughed and disconnected.

A plate of pasta was waiting for me in the kitchen.

“What are you planning to do this summer now that the Davises are selling the farm?” My stepfather asked at dinner.

I had worked there since I was thirteen. “I don’t know yet. I sent out some resumes.”

“Well, my business needs some interns for a new project. I could give out your name, if you wanted.”

“Yeah, sure.” I needed the money for next year. “What would I be doing?”

“Filing, cleaning, that sort of thing. Those might give you advantages when you graduate. It isn’t as if you’ll find a job quickly with an art degree. Plus, you can never be wrong with seeing the world.”

“Seeing the world?” I ignored his other comment about the “useless” art degree I was pursuing. He’d made it clear he didn’t believe in my choice of degree, and it was not a fight I wanted to have again.

“The project is linked to the expansion of the company in London. You’ll even have time to sightsee in your days off.”

“Wow, that would be—” *Actually, it would be perfect.* “You gotta give my name.”

My stepfather nodded, but my mother interjected, “I’m not sure. My baby alone overseas...”

“Oh come on, Mom. I’ll be moving away from home at the end of the summer anyway.”

“Exactly. You don’t need to leave home so soon.”

“It’ll be lots of experience.” *Thanks, Steppy.*

“Yes, and otherwise I’ll just veg at home.”

She was about to give in. “We’ll talk about it later.” It was practically a yes.

As soon as I was done with lunch, I kissed my mother on the cheek as a last attempt to get her to say yes and went back to my game.

Geoff and Thom were still battling the enemy in the general game. I jumped to help them, trigger happy with my crossbow, and we destroyed them in record time. As soon as we were free, we headed for the private game; we had a castle to explore.

I was still excited about the prospect of the UK, and it was not because of the job. “What would you guys say if we were to meet for real?”

As our characters turned left, we faced a skeleton rushing to us.

“You are not planning on running away are you?” Geoff said

“Of course not,” I said as I shot to slow it down. “But my stepfather works for this business, and they could send me there for a job for the summer.”

We had Skyped on a regular basis, especially when I was still figuring things out, so I knew they were really who they claimed they were.

Thom’s rogue ran to the skeleton with his poisonous dagger. “Well, you know you are always welcome on our couch,” he said.

“Great. It’s nothing official yet, but I’ll give you the news as I get it.”

We mostly played the game after that, but I kept thinking how being so far from home would be great. There was no one to hide from in London. It would give me some distance from the whole thing with Owen, and maybe I could get Ryan out of my head. That last one probably wouldn’t happen. I hadn’t gotten over him in the last two years he hadn’t been home, but a new setting would be fun.

Chapter 2

I watched around the airport for my mother or stepfather. I had been right, and the summer away had been great. I had pretty much moved out of the hotel into Geoff's guest room by the second week. His apartment was even closer to the company, so that was great.

I had never been so free to be myself. I was still drunk from the freedom. I knew now I didn't want to stay in the closet anymore. Seeing Geoff and Thom together was so natural and beautiful. It showed me exactly what kind of relationship I wanted for myself.

I texted my parents to see if they were coming, and my mother texted me they were ten minutes away. I waited outside. While I waited, I looked through the pictures in my cell phone. Some of them were of the three of us goofing off, sometimes with some of their friends. Others were of me and another intern, Elton, with whom I had had a thing. I smiled at a picture of us kissing. If that wasn't proof enough.

On our drive back, my mother kept asking questions about my summer. Some she already knew from Skyping, but some she had never asked. It was Steppy who found the perfect opening for me.

"So, did you meet any girls over there?"

I didn't feel so brave anymore, but I drew from memories of long make-out sessions on Geoff's couch.

"No, but I met a boy."

I saw him smile in the rearview mirror. "No, I meant—"

"I-I know what you meant, and I meant what I said." My voice had gotten more and more confident as I talked.

My stepfather parked the car on the side of the highway, and my mother turned on her seat to face me.

"What are you telling us?"

"I-I'm gay, Mom."

She gave a look at my stepfather, and gestured at him to move the car. "We'll talk about this at home." They didn't say a word the whole way there.

Two hours of silence and awkwardness. My timing wasn't as good as I had hoped. Now all I could do was worry about the whole thing.

When we finally got home, my stepfather took my luggage while my mother hurried me to my room. "Stepfather and I will talk. Wait for us in your room."

I swallowed, looked away, but did what she asked.

I was tempted to listen at the door, but I didn't think it was a great idea. Instead, I texted Thom.

Another awkward way to come out: five minutes into a two-hour drive.

The jet lag was intense, and I dozed off before they came to talk to me. My mother woke me up before dinner and sat me down. The pasta on my desk smelled deliciously of home.

"I know this is a confusing time for you."

"I'm not confused." I was ready for this. I was, right?

"Honey, just let me talk. I know it's confusing. You are leaving for Uni, and it's okay to be confused when big events happen in your life. But your stepfather and I, we won't have this under our roof, you understand. If you want to experiment in Calgary, go for it, but I expect you to be over this when you come home the next time."

"You are kicking me out?" I could not believe it.

"I've already called the school, and there is no problem with you getting there three weeks early. I want you to take this time apart to think about what you want from your life."

"It's not about what I want, it's who I am."

"We are leaving tomorrow, so you should eat and sleep. It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

It was only after she closed the door behind her and I was alone with a bowl of spaghetti that it dawned on me.

My own mother was rejecting me. She would probably refuse to pay for Uni if my biological father wasn't already paying for it. At least the asshole was good for something. My stomach was grumbling, but I couldn't bring myself to eat anything. I was shaking on my bed.

The summer had been so good to me, but in less than an hour, my world was crashing around me.

Without a word, my stepfather brought the last box to my bedroom in Rundle Hall. Mom was still asleep when we left, and Steppy hadn't said a word to me since then. Two and a half tedious hours.

He half nodded a good-bye, and I was left alone with packed boxes. There were so many boxes, and so little space.

I kept the door of the room open to unpack. I noticed a few additional boxes, with things I wouldn't have brought with me, like my collection of rare comics. They weren't even properly packed. Looking at the box at this moment was just a reminder my mother didn't want me in her house unless I was straight. But after two months with no closet at all, even thinking about getting back into one was painful.

And would only get me rejected again in the future.

Tock. Tock. I turned to see a tall blond guy standing in my doorway.

"I came to Rundle Hall as soon as I was told a new student was coming. I'm Philip."

"Aaron."

"Want some help unpacking?"

"I'm gay," I blurted out. "Fuck that's awkward."

Philip jumped from one foot to the other. "Hum, okay." Silence crept between us. "I'm sorry; I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say to that."

"I don't know either. But it's the best response I've gotten so far. I'm sorry I just blurted it out like that. I wouldn't mind the help, though, if you are still offering."

Instead, he pointed at the comic book box. "Oh my God! Is it what I think it is? That's sick."

"You know obscure comics?"

"Know them? I live by them. I'm studying art because I want to be creating my own."

"No shit? Me too. Not that the awful comics I wrote in junior school were any indication of talent." And it wasn't just because of Owen's cheeky script.

With the two of us, it was easy to unpack everything in record time and have fun doing it. Philip was on his second year, so he showed me around.

Later in the evening, he came by my room. A cute redheaded woman was with him with her arm around his back. She was wearing a short black skirt and a tight black T-shirt with the bloody face of a zombie on the front.

“This is Aaron; I talked to you about him. Aaron, this is my girlfriend Victoria.”

“Nice meeting you. We were heading out for a movie. You want to come?”

I hesitated, but Philip had joined his hands in a begging gesture. “You don’t want me to sit through a romantic comedy, do you?”

Next to him, Victoria rolled her eyes.

I laughed. “Who says I’m not the one who’d want a romantic comedy?”

Victoria pointed at me. “I like this one. Now, if we aren’t leaving soon, we’ll miss the trailers.”

I grabbed the light vest on my bed, and we headed out to the complex.

“So, what are we going to watch?”

“We were pretty much decided on the new *Death by Star* movie.”

We took the bus to the cinema complex, and as we waited in line, Victoria elbowed me. “So tell me? Is a cute guy like you single?”

“Don’t tell her, or she’ll set you up with every guy she knows.”

They sounded a lot like Geoff and Thom.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Only the interesting ones.”

I laughed.

“Single. But I don’t need help finding a boyfriend.” *Bullshit. Without Geoff, I would never have had the courage to say anything to Elton.*

“Three tickets for *Death by Star*, please.” Victoria said to the teenager behind the counter.

I wanted to say I was going to pay for my ticket, but she was already giving him her debit card.

Philip winked at me. “The advantages of having a rich girlfriend.”

Victoria must have heard him despite the whisper, because she elbowed him hard in the stomach. She was still smiling, though. "Shut up or you won't get your allocation."

I was laughing hard while he begged her on one knee. "Oh, please, my beautiful Mistress, I beg of you not to cut me off."

She laughed too, grabbed his collar and brought him to her lips. She whispered something into his ear, and it made Philip smile. She then left us behind to get into the theatre.

"I'm so getting laid tonight," he told me when she was out of earshot.

"Well, good for you." I tapped his back and followed Victoria.

The movie was full of spaceship explosions and mindless action scenes, aka a really fun movie. Philip and Victoria were glued to each other but not in a sexually charged way. Just being comfortable together.

After the movie, we stopped for a late dinner, and they brought me back to my dorm. I was optimistic about the year.

I found a job in the first week, and for the next two weeks, I shared my time between the job and Philip and Victoria. Even after the first new students showed up in the hall, I would pass a lot of my time in Philip's apartment in Yamnuska Hall.

When my first classes started, I had a nice routine figured out. I had no news from my parents, but the novelty of university life didn't leave me a lot of time to think about it. I was having the warm feeling I had had in London living with the guys.

Classes were fun and creative, and good god, I hadn't seen Ryan Beaulieu yet. Why I even wanted to go to the same school was a mystery to me. And then in my first week of school, I saw him in the cafeteria. He was hanging out with the other members of the hockey team, if I believed their Dinos jerseys. I changed direction with my tray, surprising Victoria who was following me.

"Who is it?"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Oh, come on," she said putting her tray in front of mine. "There was a great table next to the bunch of cute Dinos jocks."

“I just didn’t feel like sitting next to a group of jocks.”

“I didn’t know you had prejudices.”

“I don’t.”

She poured her chocolate milk into a glass. “What’s the problem then? I promise I won’t tell.”

“What won’t you tell?” Philip said as he sat next to me.

“Which Dino Aaron has a crush on.”

“Vicki!”

“Fine. I won’t press.”

Damn it. “Beaulieu. Number forty-six.”

I swear she was about to say something, but she and Philip shared a look and she closed her mouth.

“I’m sure there’s someone out there for you,” Philip said.

Suspicious, but he was right. Crushing on Mr. Straight Guy wasn’t good for my health. May as well forget about him.

It did not stop me from glancing over at the Dinos table. He was laughing at something another player said, and I was back in high school admiring him from afar.

Later in class, I kept thinking about what Philip had said. I did need to move on. And wasn’t there a saying about the best way to get over someone was to get under someone else? It worked well enough in London. I had barely thought about Ryan overseas, too busy making out with Elton.

But then how could I meet someone for a date? Maybe Victoria would have an idea. I checked my calendar for her schedule. She had nothing for the rest of the day, so I texted her. Turned out she was waiting for me after my class.

“I need a boyfriend.”

“I know just the place.”

That was easy.

She brought me to the Students’ Union in the MacEwan Student Centre and we followed the direction to the QCentre. We were welcomed by a young person with long blond hair. A sticker on her white-yellow-and-green shirt

indicated her name—their name—was Maya and they preferred the pronouns They/Them/Their. It was new to me, but if they wanted it, I was going to do it.

Victoria took care of the introductions as she already knew Maya.

“We directed a workshop together last year,” Victoria told me.

I nodded, then let Maya show me around the centre, and introduce me to the other volunteers.

I promised them I would be back later. Half an hour in the QCentre and I was already feeling at home.

Because I couldn't avoid Ryan forever, I met him in the halls of the MacEwan Student Centre.

Ryan did a double take. “A? I didn't know you were coming to U of C.”

“Hm yep.”

He was sporting light stubble, and a tight black T-shirt. *Is this guy ever not sexy? It was ridiculous.*

“Your mother told me you went to Europe.”

He had asked my mother about me?

“You could have said good-bye, you know.”

“It kind of happened fast.” *'Cause I couldn't wait to get away from home.*

“I bet you had a lot of fun. We should totally hang out. I want to hear about it.”

My lips were dry. “Yeah, sure.”

A whole evening where I would be alone with him. Maybe I could invite Philip and Victoria along.

I was tempted to follow him into whatever organization he was involved in at MacEwan Student Centre. I left the building instead; Victoria was waiting for me.

“I saw you talked to Beaulieu.”

“Yeah. And I made a fool of myself again. Doesn't seem like his brother told him I'm gay.”

“Good, then you can tell him yourself.”

“Are you crazy?”

“He’s going to figure it out some time, you know.”

“Yeah, the later the better.”

She linked her arm with mine. “You have the worst sense of observation in the world, you know that.” She shook her head. “We gotta go if you don’t want to be late for your next class.”

When we got to my class, Philip was leaving the classroom, so he and Victoria went on their way, and I took my place in the front.

Two hours later, my head was swimming with my new knowledge of contemporary Canadian art. Ryan Beaulieu leaned on the wall with his Dinos sport bag hanging from his shoulder.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said “Vicki told me where you’d be.”

“She did, eh.” *Bitch.*

“She can be a bit much, I know, but you can’t have a better friend.”

“I didn’t know you knew each other.” Victoria hadn’t said anything to me.

“We have a couple of classes together.”

Naturally, we walked side by side. Ryan knew a lot of people, waving around and smiling at friends. He always had that way with people, even in high school. Always making people feel good no matter who they were. The anti-bully. If only I knew for sure he wouldn’t reject me.

After a while, though, I noticed his hands clinched next to his body.

“Let’s get this over with.”

I stopped. Felt the sweat on my hands. Owen had talked to him, and it was Ryan’s time to tell me to back off. I braced myself for the upcoming desertion.

“Look, I probably have no right to ask you this, but you can’t tell Owen.”

Eh what? He must have realised I wasn’t understanding because he moved his bag toward me.

It was getting more confused by the second.

“Dude, I think your brother knows you play for the Dinos.”

Ryan pointed just above the Dinos logo. And there lay a small rainbow pin.

“You can’t tell Owen I’m gay.”

I stood there speechless.

“Please. He wouldn’t understand.”

“No, he wouldn’t.”

I saw the realisation appear on his face. “I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. I didn’t want to show that Owen’s rejection had affected me, even after the summer. I changed the subject.

“You still want to hear about London?”

From the corner of my eyes, I saw some guy waving at us. Ryan smiled at him and waved back.

“Actually I need to go now, but give me your number and I’ll text you later.”

We swapped our cell phones back and forth, then he joined his friend. I couldn’t stop smiling when I turned away. An uncontrollable need for laughter bubbled up, but when I turned one last time to see him, Ryan and the guy looked more than friendly to each other. Of course, someone like Ryan wouldn’t be single.

Chapter 3

Victoria and Philip found me lying on her bed.

“I hope you don’t mind. Your roommate let me in.”

After discovering Ryan was gay but taken, I had needed some time alone, which wasn’t really possible with my roommate. Victoria’s second-year residence allowed her an actual apartment instead of a dorm room. I could have gone to Philip’s too, but I doubted he wanted to hear me complain about the man of my dreams. Even open-minded straight guys had their limits.

I didn’t remember ever not being attracted to Ryan. Even before I knew about attraction and sex, Ryan had been the hero I’d looked up to. It sounded a little girly, but I just knew he was perfect for me.

Victoria sat next to me, forcing me to move and sit up. Philip took the chair at her desk.

“Are you still pining after Beaulieu? Because he is gay.”

“I know. He told me. But it doesn’t really matter as he is not exactly single either.”

“Shit. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have told him where you were.”

“At least now I know, I guess.”

Victoria hugged me while Philip was still looking on his cell phone. I was almost surprised when he said, “Let him breathe, Vi.”

She moved slightly away. “You got an idea?”

And there they went again with the silent communication.

“I’ve got everything under control,” he said, before kissing her and gesturing for me to follow him. “You’re coming with me.”

I raised my eyebrow in a questioning look.

“Go with him.”

Philip’s apartment was on the same level as Victoria’s. We passed one of his roommates in the communal area and headed for his bedroom. I had never actually been in his bedroom before, but it was what I was expecting and totally the opposite at the same time. It was a mess, with more clothes on the ground

than in the drawers. He had a Dinos logo glued next to his bed, and behind his computer on the desk, there was a hockey poster from the Vancouver Canucks.

He went to his closet and opened the door. I yelped in surprise at what I saw glued to the inside of the door and looked away. It could not be unseen. It was a big drawing of Victoria wearing nothing but an opened leather vest and really tight black leather panties. Her pose was sexual, and she was holding a whip with both hands. Atop her was the stylized text "Bow to your Queen!"

He noticed I kept looking back at the poster. "Sorry." He delicately unglued the poster and put it face down on his bed. As he moved away from the closet, I saw that he had his own leather clothing.

He didn't offer any explanations; he didn't need to. I wasn't blind to the dynamic between them.

Philip then went through the non-leather part of his closet. Stopping at some T-shirt, looking at me, then going back to the closet.

"Phil?" I asked finally, "What are we doing?"

He didn't say anything; instead, he grabbed a pink T-shirt and threw it at me.

"You do know it'll never fit me, right?"

I had a good inch on him, and his body shape was different from mine.

"Just try it for fuck's sake. If we don't find anything, we always have some time to go shopping."

"Are you going to tell me what we are doing?"

"Can't you see it? We are getting ready for going out tonight."

I offered a judgement-free statement. "I don't think we're into the same kind of clubs."

"That's why we ain't going to my club, but yours."

"A gay bar?" I said, surprised. I could see Victoria wanting to come, but straight-boy Philip in a gay bar?

"I even found the perfect place for you. It'll be so full of single hot gay guys you'll forget everything about Beaulieu. The best way to forget about someone—"

"Is to get under someone else."

“Yeah, but no. It’s to have a guy’s night out with your best friend. Now try the damn shirt.”

The shirt fit surprisingly well. It was tighter than I was used to but not uncomfortably so. The pink fabric was stretching on the few muscles I had. The V-neck felt somewhat strange, but it did look good.

“Are we really going to a gay bar?”

“It’s called *The Puck*. It opened last year, and their website advertises it as a queer version of The Garage Sports Bar. And if you don’t laugh at any of my possible discomforts, I promise not to force you to a BDSM club with me.”

I laughed. *Why the hell not?*

My feet knocked on each other, and I saw the street coming up really fast, but Philip helped me upright despite his own drunkenness. I had never allowed myself to be this drunk with Owen, afraid I would say or do something to clue him in. I laughed for no reason at all.

“Wow, you guys are really drunk.”

Victoria had picked us up after *The Puck* had closed, and she was now witnessing our drunken state. I laughed even harder. She helped us into Philip’s apartment. I fell on his bed, and he fell half on me. It was his turn to laugh. Victoria rolled her eyes at us. Philip pushed me to the wall. I saw him grab Victoria’s face between his hands and kiss her.

“I love you.”

She smiled at him and helped him under his covers. “I love you, too.”

I pulled my body above Philip. “Ahhhh.”

In answer, she pushed me back onto the bed. “Good night, boys.”

I woke up the next morning with a headache from hell and Philip moaning Victoria’s name in his sleep. His morning erection dug into my thigh. I moved away from him, careful not to wake him up. He moved around and moaned but didn’t wake up.

Two glasses of water and four pills waited for us on the desk. I took mine, silently thanking Victoria for everything.

Going into Rundle Hall with a hangover was like a walk of shame, without the sex. All I wanted was a shower and a good breakfast. My roommate was sitting on his bed, listening to music and reading a book for his class.

He lowered his ear buds. "Some jock came in last night. Ryan... something French."

"Beaulieu?"

"Yes, something like that."

I nodded and took my stuff and headed to the showers.

I wondered what he wanted, and even though my imagination was heading into all sorts of romantic and sexual venues, I knew he probably wanted to know what England was like. As if he could ever really be interested in me, his little brother's friend.

It didn't change the fact that closing my eyes, I could imagine him coming into the shower area. He would open the curtain, already naked. His tall erection pointed at me. I would back off to let him in the shower. He would smile at me like I was his entire world. With my back to the wall, he would lean in. I imagined the smell of my soap was actually his cologne, giving me vertigo. I would close my eyes the second his lips touched mine. The kiss would consume me, and his hand would brush my body, circling around my painfully hard cock.

The sound of the door opening jerked me out of the fantasy. *Damn it!* I didn't move or breathe for a while. I didn't want whoever was there to know what I was doing.

"Aaron?"

My heart missed a beat. *Ryan?*

"Your roommate told me you are here. Is it a bad time?"

A bad time? My cock was ready to explode; his voice didn't help the matter.

"What am I saying; of course it's a bad time. I can come back lat—"

"NO! I mean, wait, I'm almost done."

I cut the hot water dry, avoiding a yelp last minute. The shock helped somewhat, but I was still worried it would come back. I closed everything, dried quickly and jumped into my jeans and T-shirt.

My hair was still dripping on my shirt when I got into my room. Ryan was waiting uneasily on my bed.

My roommate looked between the two of us as we stood in silence. "Damn," he said, "I totally forgot about that meeting for that... hm... thing."

Subtle dude, subtle.

But then, my standing there in silence wasn't the suavest move on my part. *And the award for the most awkward goes to—"How's the Dinos?"—Aaron Lonheart, ladies and gentlemen.*

"Good, good. How's—fuck. I saw you running naked in my backyard, it shouldn't be this awkward."

If it were a movie, I would have heard the crickets in the background. *Maybe they should give him the award instead.*

"Do you, hm, do you still want to see my pictures of London?" *Anything to tone down the awkwardness.*

I grabbed my PC and sat next to him. Damn it was hard not to feel the hair on my skin rise to be so close to him. I could barely concentrate on the subject at hand: my summer in London.

He was so close, yet I didn't dare move. I kept thinking, *He has a boyfriend.* But all I wanted was to reach out and touch his skin, feel the muscles moving under my hands and my lips. I shifted on the bed to hide my erection.

He leaned back on his arm a little. If I were to move just a little to the left, I could lean into him, feel his arms around me. I quivered.

"A?"

I changed the picture. "Hm?"

"Would it be weird if I were to kiss you?"

I looked in his eyes unsure if he were serious or not. He was biting his lips. How come someone could look so strong and vulnerable at the same time?

"No," I whispered, "it wouldn't be weird at all."

I bent to put the computer on my desk, and when I sat up, he was even closer than before. I smiled and swallowed. I had dreamt of this moment, and it was finally coming true. But Ryan didn't move to kiss me, so I reached for his shoulder and pulled him to my lips. The kiss was hesitant at first, and I pulled him above me, moving so I could rest my head on my pillow. My arms slid from his shoulders to his back, and I pulled him closer. I just loved the way his weight felt on me. If the world had stopped spinning at that moment, I wouldn't have been surprised.

My legs locked around his lower back, my straining erection pushing into him. Our tongues twined together, and I moaned against him.

Oh yes. I felt his erection growing against my own. My hands reached for his T-shirt and pulled it up. I wanted to feel his skin so much.

He moved back to help me with the T-shirt, and I used the time to do the same thing with mine. The two shirts landed on my roommate's bed, but we went right back to making out. His touch inflamed me, making me shake and want for more. Lust took over my body. His kisses moved to my neck and he accidentally licked an erogenous zone I didn't know existed. I whimpered in his arms, so he did it again and again until I was begging.

I pulled his hair to bring our lips together again. I reached for his jeans, and I was almost there when something metallic fell on the ground and I heard a "Fuck."

Ryan scrambled for his shirt, and I was ready to yell at my roommate when I realised it wasn't him. My father was standing with his back to us, a hand in front of his eyes.

"Dad? What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt with your... hum boyfriend. I was going to wait until you were installed, but the school billing said you had come almost three weeks early, so I—I'll leave you to it. Call me back when you have some time, okay?"

By the time he was done talking, we were dressed again, the passion extinguished.

"Wait!" I said before I could think about it.

Ryan nodded to me. He kissed me, even though my father was back to looking at us. "I've got a practise anyway. I'll call you later for a rematch."

I smiled and reached for him again for a French kiss. He wanted to do this again, and I wanted to give him a preview of what he could expect. I was even able not to blush when I noticed my father watching us.

Ryan had to pass next to my father, and I admired the way he nodded at him as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

My father nodded back. "Nice to see you again, Owen."

"Ryan. And the same for me."

With Ryan gone, I was left alone with my father. I had only seen the man a handful of times since he had left Mom, and every time it had turned into a disaster.

“Your mother said you were confused. I was worried.”

“I’m not confused.” If there was one thing I was sure of, it was this one.

“I didn’t have the impression you were.”

There was a moment of silence.

“I know you said you never wanted to see me again, but I thought since we both live in the same city, we could... reconnect.”

“Even if I’m gay?”

It took him aback.

“Of course. Why... Why would that change anything? You’re my son!”

“It mattered to Mom!” I hadn’t realised I was angry at her until then.

“Is that why you came to school early?”

I nodded. “She wants no pervert in her home.”

He looked right at me. Intentionally. “I don’t see any pervert.”

All of my emotions bubbled to the surface. Anger, pain, joy. They threatened to get out all at once. Years, I had hated my father for leaving us. In my mind, all faults had been on him. How dare he make a new family in Calgary? Yet he was the only one who still had my back.

Next thing I knew, he was pulling me into his arms. I was uncomfortable at first, my hands on each side of my body, tears on my cheeks and my estranged father patting my back and telling me it was going to be okay.

Pride stopped me from showing him exactly how grateful I was, so I just patted his back twice and moved away.

“I came here to issue an official invitation for a good homemade meal with Millie and the kids next Friday, at seven. You should bring your Ryan. They’ll be happy to meet him.” I knew he was honest when he didn’t pause before inviting Ryan along.

Honest enough that I didn’t know how to tell him I didn’t think Ryan was mine. Once I promised my dad I would be there, I didn’t wait for Ryan to call

me. I grabbed my light jacket from the hook behind the door and left for the ice rink in the Olympic Oval.

The team was training already when I got there. The coach was yelling orders to the players. I found Ryan, and it was as if he was floating on the ice. I didn't care about the other players, to me Ryan was the best, and he sure deserved a place in the NHL.

I sat on the bleachers and watched. I was surprised when Ryan waved at me. He even stopped in the side of the bleachers to ask me how I was, but left when his coach called him on it. Once the practise was over, the players exited the ice one by one, with Ryan the second before last.

"I'm all yours as soon as I shower," he said, pulling off his helmet. He even leaned in to kiss me under the cat calls of the guy behind him. It was more like a peck on the lips, but I was so surprised he would do this at this particular moment with all of the witnesses.

The guy behind him threw his arm around Ryan's neck and forced him away from the rink. "You can see your boyfriend later, Don Juan."

And then I was alone in the bleachers.

I waited for Ryan at the Oval's entrance with growing impatience. Players went, paying no attention to me, as if I belonged. Some stopped to tell me Ryan would be out soon.

As soon as he got out, Ryan threw his arm around my shoulders even though anyone could have seen us. *If he were dating that other guy, he wouldn't be so obvious, right?*

"So? How did it go with your father?"

"Well enough. He invited the two of us to dinner. You don't need to accept."

"Do you want me there?"

Could it be that easy?

"If you want to come."

Now we were just turning in circles.

"It's your father, and I know how you feel about him. I remember when he left." Ryan squeezed my shoulder. "And he didn't know you were gay until this afternoon. I'll be more than happy to come if you want me there."

We reached Cascade Hall without making a decision on the matter. Somewhere along the way, his arm had slid from my shoulders, and we got to his apartment holding hands. As soon as he closed his bedroom door behind me, I leaned in to kiss him. Right off, he pushed me against the door and intensified the kiss. I answered back, but he backed off before I had enough of my senses back to reach for his jeans.

“We should talk first.”

“I think I’m done talking,” I said as I reached for my own jeans and pulled them down.

His eyes glanced over my package. “Damn. Later, then.”

He moved toward the bed, and I followed him. We kissed again, and this time I reached for his jeans and opened them just enough to be able to reach in his underwear. His cock in my hand was bigger than I had imagined, and fuck if it wasn’t hotter than the fantasy. He closed his eyes and grabbed the headboard. With my free hand on his lower back, I helped him stand.

“Oh God. This is so much better than I imagined.”

“Oh it is, eh?” I said, as I smeared the cum at the tip of his cock with my thumb.

His legs shook under him, and I was surprised with my own self-control.

“All damned summer.”

Hell, wasn't that a thought.

“Me too.”

“Liar.” He may have wanted to say something else, but he yelped after I jerked him.

“You’re right. I’ve been imagining it since that last summer at the lake.”

“Shit, A.”

The way he moaned my name almost got me beyond the edge, so I kissed him hard. Some quick flicks of my wrist and he came all over my hand.

I moved a little to the side, and Ryan fell on the bed. He watched me standing above him. I brought my hand to my mouth, but before I could taste him, he was pulling me to him.

I was on my knees on the bed. He was half lying there. He raised my T-shirt above my head and kissed me just above my breasts. My head bent backwards as his lips drew kisses up my belly until I was shaking from desire.

He lowered his body on the bed and placed me above him so that I was almost in his face. I watched him lowering my briefs until my cock popped out. The first lick was like electricity rushing all over my body. After watching Ryan come and being so close to the edge, it didn't take much of that image of Ryan sucking me to get me off.

After we cleaned my hand and the headboard I had held on to, we lay under the covers completely naked. We made out some more, dozed off, and then made out again. We heard the sound of people talking and could smell the food being cooked in the common area. Ryan's stomach growled under my ear.

"Sorry. I usually eat instead of having sex after a practise."

"Then maybe you should eat."

"I don't want to." And instead he kissed me.

But then someone knocked on the door.

"We're busy."

"I cooked. There's enough for you and KC if you guys want some."

KC. The name brought a sense of cold. I was going to be sick. Must be the other guy. I left the bed and scrambled to find my clothes. I was stupid. Of course, he really did have a boyfriend. Painful tears threatened to fall.

I bent to get my underwear, and Ryan called my name to stop me.

"I know how it sounds," he said once I looked at him. "I'm sure you are aware of the principle of fuck buddies."

It hit me like a ton of bricks. Not a boyfriend. But it didn't really reassure me.

"I don't want a fuck friend." I didn't mean to blurt it out.

I wanted a boyfriend. I wanted what Geoff and Thom had. And Philip and Victoria.

"Neither do I. Look. Let's get dressed, and we can talk about it with lunch."

I nodded.

Once we were dressed, he brought some of the lunch his roommate made into the bedroom.

“I’m not out at home,” he said, “and it makes me a little paranoid. When you didn’t come for a run, I thought maybe you noticed the way I was looking at you and were avoiding me. Then your mother told me you went to work in England for the summer. I was sure I had missed my chance. And then you were here, in the same school as I and... Is it weird if I hoped you chose U of C because of me?”

“I did.”

“Really?”

“Did I say that out loud?”

Ryan smiled at me. “Yeah, yeah you did.” He reached for my hand and squeezed. “You don’t even have to say anything. I won’t see KC or anyone else as long as you’ll have me. I don’t need fuck buddies when I’ve got a boyfriend.”

I loved the sound of this. “Is it what we are? Boyfriends?”

“If it’s what you want.”

Of course, I wanted this. We kissed to seal the deal, the food between us crashing on the ground.

He laughed against my lips. “This is terrible.”

I laughed too. We kept kissing. We had all the time in the world to clean up this mess.

The End

Author Bio

MC Houle hasn't always wanted to be a writer, but characters lived swirling into her mind since early childhood. After years of acting out those characters with her sisters and friends, she wrote down her stories first in fanfiction then through fiction writing.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

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MORE THAN HE CAN SEE

By Nicole Forcine

Photo Description

I look at this picture and I see baggy, tired eyes, thick brows, some shyness in the pose. I find this man adorable (because yum redheads), but I can see the plainness too. He sits, most of his body in shadow, looking over his freckled shoulder at the camera. There is no smile on his face, and the rest of his body sits at a profile.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Hi there. I met the man of my dreams the other day. He had these adorable red curls (and I'm just a sucker for redheads, and curly hair, so put those two together and oh boy, droooooooooool) and the most beautiful smile I've ever seen. He's not gorgeous or anything, in fact, most people would say he was plain. But then, so am I. I don't even have the smile or the hair, or anything like that.

Can you find a way for me to meet him, and maybe even get him to smile at me?

Sincerely,

Kathleen

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: redhead, disability, twink, sweet, short top, shop owner, New Age, student

Word Count: 7,696

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MORE THAN HE CAN SEE

By Nicole Forcine

Talon arrived at Sacred Grounds, opening the door and enjoying the warm familiar scent of incense and the sound of wind chimes and New Age music. The past two weeks away had been nice, but nothing beat this place. Working here was as easy as breathing.

“Tal, you’re back!” Tam shrieked and ran around the counter, hugging him around the neck, like she was seven instead of world-weary fifteen. “How was Puerto Rico?”

“Hot, humid, but... fun.” Talon squeezed his baby sister around the waist.

“Did you bring me anything?”

And now she was fifteen again. “I’ll bring it to the house tonight.”

Talon went around the counter as Tam checked the inventory and rattled on about all the things he had missed in the store, at their parents’ house, her school, perhaps the entire Earth. It was hard to comprehend spoken at Mach five. One thing that didn’t change was the location of his step stool. With it, he was able to not only reach the modified iPad they now used as a till, he could almost look a customer in the eye.

He checked the cash safe stashed next to the stool. With a few twists, it opened, revealing a fresh cash drawer, which he placed on the counter.

Tam motioned to the back of the shop with a toss of dyed-pink dreadlocks. “Beginners Meditation. It’s almost over. And Momma Yzma’s coming by to pick Calliope up, if you haven’t seen her yet.”

“She was hard to miss.” Talon licked a thumb and started counting. “I told her I could take a taxi from the airport, but you know her.”

Momma Yzma hated wasting money, and she was great with stretching it out as far as humanly possible, much to the delight of their three kids and her more capricious wife, Calliope. With her money sense, Sacred Grounds had grown into a profitable Seaside staple for as long as Tam had been alive.

Tam snorted, but her comment was interrupted by the sound of applause coming from the back meeting room. “Looks like Mom’s done!”

A cluster of people, flushed and happy, walked down the hallway into the main shop. Talon knew most of the faces; those of regulars who came to purchase metaphysical supplies or local handcrafts or the latest book about the paranormal. A few were younger, probably college students doing summer semester like his and Tam's brother Thorn.

One made Talon's throat go dry at the very first glance.

Dark red curls ran riot on his head down to his ears. Young, definitely, pale with approximately ten billion freckles on his arms and shoulders. Talon decided the second he got home, he was going to pray to whoever invented tank tops, because they were doing the kid all kinds of favors.

Calliope was at his side, arm on his shoulder, speaking quietly. He stood about a head taller than she did. Talon started making a mental list of why he shouldn't be staring. For starters, it was rude. Also, the young man was probably around eighteen, and that was ten years too young for Talon to be looking. Not that his dance card had ever been full; few guys went for someone who needed a step stool to see clearly over most counters.

Talon's full grown height was four foot three. When his mothers adopted him at the age of three, they did their best to make their world as accommodating as possible for him and, some years later, both of his average-sized siblings. Hell, living with a pair of dedicated, in love, open-minded, hippy lesbians was like hitting the jackpot. They didn't bat an eye when he came out, or when Tam started dying her hair strange colors and asked for a vibrator, or when Thorn wanted a nose ring and dated a girl who was as pale as he was black. They picked their battles and only wanted the best for their children.

The outside world, on the other hand, was less than kind. Buying clothes, getting his car refurbished, even using the john was a pain in the ass. And forget dating. After spending his college years trying his luck, he would either get the creeps who wanted him to pretend he was a kid or jack squat. He had porn, he had toys of his own, he had the love and support of his family, and he didn't need a man.

And then the curly-haired boy smiled at something Calliope said, and Talon forgot about the whole "not needing a man" thing. He wasn't sporting the model-grade looks of some of the men Talon peered at on his vacation; far from it. There was a touch of acne on his chin. His nose was a little too much for his face, and it was pretty obvious that he didn't get much sleep with the little bags

under those dark brown eyes. But that smile was so sweet and earnest and exactly perfect on his face.

“Oh Talon!” Calliope’s voice broke the spell, and he had to move quickly off the stool before she knocked him over in her delight. Her wavy brown hair covered his face like a mask as he was hugged tightly. “Yzma told me you were looking pretty good! I love the tan!”

She pulled away and examined one of Talon’s arms. “Did you get to hit the beach? Were there a lot of handsome men? I hear Latino men are hot as...”

“Calliope, not now.” Talon pulled his arm free and held both hands up to stop. “I’ll tell you the same thing I told Momma Yzma. I’ll show you pictures and everything later, all right?”

His mother gave him an eyeroll that would put anything Tam tried with her eyes to shame. “Fine. Could you ring up Cale? Tam, go grab *At One with Yourself*. And give him the student discount.”

Cale. An Irish name. Figures. Talon got back on the stool and managed to look professional, smiling up at the redhead. “Nice name.”

Cale’s dark eyes darted away from Talon’s, and he simply nodded.

Okaaaay. “Do you know what it means?”

Cale’s thin fingers tapped on the counter, and Talon swore he could see that pale neck was getting a little red. Obviously being asked nosy questions by a little dude was making him uncomfortable. It happened sometimes with new customers. Best to get the sale done quickly. At least he wasn’t getting the “Lollipop Guild”, “oh aren’t you so cute” nonsense.

Normally he could sweep subtle rejection by strangers under the rug and move on, but watching Cale bail out of the store after swiping his card felt like the young man was taking some part of Talon with him.

At least he managed to scope a last name from the card. “Cale Blake”.

His family lived on fifteen acres of mostly woods with one big family house, and the one house where Talon lived. One summer five years ago, everyone got together to build his place ten acres away, because he wanted both the privacy now that he was an adult, and the ability to get to the big house in no time if he was needed. The family was only a quick trip in a four-by-four

away, which was great when Talon was tired from closing the shop and not in the mood to make his own supper. Both his mothers were demons in the kitchen.

It was around the dinner table where Talon showed off pictures of his vacation on his phone and gave away souvenirs. Tam was thrilled to get a hand-dyed sundress that managed to match her hair. Thorn took the carved statue with thanks and a weird question.

“Hey, Calliope, did Cale make it to your class today? He’s not answering my texts.”

Talon nearly choked on a roll at the question. Thorn knew him? Well, he supposed it made sense, since Thorn was a sophomore at college. Guess he was older than Talon thought.

“Yep, he was on time and everything. We had a very intense class today, so he’s probably resting. We don’t have to be constantly attached to our electronics, you know.”

Talon snorted. “Says the woman who is still thumbing through my phone for pictures.”

Momma Yzma took the device out of her wife’s hand and set it back in front of Talon. “He has a point. You can look as hard as you want, but if Talon met someone special, you know he’d tell us.”

Tell them? He’d hire a marching band and a sky writer if such a thing ever happened. Besides, he was more than pleased with the eye candy he managed to shoot. Now if he got a picture of Cale, his spank bank would be complete forever.

During dessert, he got a more detailed update on what everyone was up to. Tam was designing a ritual for the next meeting of her youth coven; Thorn was two weeks shy of finishing the tiny house on wheels in the backyard. It would be all ready for him to move in before summer was out, and after graduation, he would be taking it for his own vacation of sorts. Calliope and Momma Yzma managed to get new solar panels delivered, and Talon immediately volunteered to help put them up with the others that nearly covered their roof.

Thorn showed him the progress on his house before Talon went to his own for the night, which gave Talon an opening. “Cale’s a friend of yours?”

Thorn did a double take. “You met him?”

“Yeah.” Why was that so surprising? “I rang up his book. He was... quiet.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?”

“Cale’s quiet. We’re taking the same labs this summer. He’s an okay guy, just quiet.”

“Okay” could mean so much coming out of a twenty-year-old. Talon had seen his “okay” in action. He wasn’t even sure why he brought up the topic. Talon was *not* in the running, not even sure if the kid was gay, and from that afternoon’s near-silent treatment, there was no point in him thinking about it.

It didn’t stop Cale and his earnest little smile from visiting his dreams that night.

Talon quickly got back into the swing of things, the familiar rhythm of mornings of meditation and exercise, afternoons and evenings of taking over the shop from his moms, six days a week. His siblings assisted when they could between Thorn’s classes and Tam’s summer volunteer work. Seeing familiar faces in town and at work made him remember just why leaving Seaside for two weeks had made him both excited and scared. Everything was comfortable here. Everyone knew him and unlike the strangers during his vacation, couldn’t give less of a shit about his height. He missed that most of all.

Beginners Meditation was two classes a week, and Cale was there on Thursday, still quiet, still skittish. Would it be weird if Talon asked Thorn for more information about him?

More importantly, why was he still stuck on this kid?

Monday rolled back around, and Thorn was working by the time he got in to the shop, right in the middle of Calliope’s meditation class. He kept the question of Cale to himself as they bantered about classes and inventory, and that weird crunchy guy with the matted hair who always smelled like weed.

“We’ve been telling that guy for years that we don’t sell water pipes, and he keeps coming back.” Thorn chuckled, handing Talon an opened box of scrying crystals. “He even showed up while you were gone and, like, ordered me to find the ‘imp’ and see if you’d pull them out of your ass or something.”

Talon groaned, set down his step stool next to the display of scrying crystals dangling on branches in the shop window, unfolded it, and climbed on. “Imp? Was he on a Game of Thrones kick?”

“Congrats, he’s mistaken you for Peter Dinklage.”

“If that’s the worst thing he can call me, I’ll take it,” Talon chuckled and started hanging the new crystals on the branches of the display. He ran a hand through his dark blond hair and smirked at his brother. “How high was he?”

Thorn bit his lip, but couldn’t stop the laughter. “Blazed, man. He was so fucking blazed.”

Applause rang from the back room, signifying the end of the class. Thorn rushed to the counter, ready to ring up anything the students wanted to buy—Calliope was an upselling genius. Thank fuck Talon was facing away from the door, and had something to occupy himself with.

He could focus on arranging and adding price tags to the shiny things as Thorn loudly greeted Cale. “Hey, man! Did you like the book?”

It took a second for Cale to respond. “It... was... pret-ty... good.”

Talon nearly turned around. Cale’s voice had a bass to it that he wasn’t expecting, but the words came out slowly, in a dragging cadence.

Thorn kept talking, as if that was completely normal. “Awesome! Look, Calliope’s always saying that eating well is key to mindfulness, and no one cooks like she does.”

“She... t-taught... you, right?”

Talon smiled. Calliope and Momma Yzma made it a point to teach their children how to cook healthy, cheap, and vegetarian meals, because as Momma Yzma put it when Talon was learning the ropes: “None of my children are going to go within five feet of a package of fucking ramen noodles.” Give either brother access to a dorm kitchen, and they could make what looked like miracles to the rest of their floor.

“Yeah! You wanna come over tonight? It’s Momma Yzma’s turn in the kitchen.”

The pause made Talon look up into the window, straining to see Thorn and Cale’s reflection as his heart pounded. The thought of having Cale that close, near his home, in his family home, made his hands tremble just a little as he waited for a response.

Cale’s voice dropped to a slow whisper, “W-W-Would... he... mind?”

Ouch. Talon’s entire body stiffened, and the crystal in his hand clanged against one already hung.

Thorn laughed. "Are you kidding? No one misses dinner in our house!"

And just like that, Talon had no way of backing out without having to explain shit to his fucking idiot brother. At least there would be wine.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

The big house was supposed to be a place where Talon could find some peace. He was among his kin. This was his home!

And yet, he sat in the living room and held up rune stones from a bag for Tam while Thorn, Cale, and Momma Yzma were in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on dinner. He wanted to climb out of his skin and leave it there like a weird placeholder while the rest of him ran back to his place.

"*Kenaz*. Translation: beacon or torch. Divination meaning: vision, passion, the power to create your own reality. Reversed: instability, exposure, nakedness," Tam recited, her eyes aimed to the ceiling.

In the kitchen, Talon could hear Cale. "One... or... two... cups?"

It took him a moment to notice his sister smiling at him hopefully. He pulled himself out of his own brain long enough to check the rune himself, and nodded reassuringly. "You got it."

"Yes!" Her fist shot up in the air in celebration.

Back in the kitchen, this time Momma Yzma, "Cale, you're a natural."

"Earth to Tal..." Tam bounced the bottom of the felt bag of runes he held. "Show me another one, will ya?"

Focus, Talon thought to himself before he reached into the bag, felt for the carved side to make sure it was facing Tam, and then held it up.

Cale and Talon had barely exchanged glances since he arrived at the big house. Up that close, even across the room or knowing he was in the kitchen, the boy was too much of a temptation, and Talon feared standing half the time, lest he popped a boner. So, helping his sister drill runes was the best distraction.

At least, until Cale and Thorn came into the living room while whatever they were making cooked.

Talon stood up; ready to escape to the study or the craft room that was once his old bedroom or anywhere else. Hell, Cale looked more uncomfortable than he felt, if that was possible.

“Hey, Cale, do you know how to read runes?” Tam took the velvet bag from Talon’s hand and frowned at him. “Where you going, Tal? I want to show off my amazing divination skills, and you’re the only one in the room who can check me!”

Talon glanced at Cale, who was devoted to checking out the minute detail of his own socked feet. Talon could either leave for his own comfort, or appease Tam and be encouraging like a good big bro.

Family obligation beats personal crisis every time.

Tam clapped and shoved the open bag at Cale. “Pick one and I’ll guess what it means, and Tal can tell us if I got it wrong.”

Thorn snorted. “You know, it’s more than just knowing what the runes mean, right?”

She stuck out her tongue. “I know that, doofus. It’s only the first step, but I have to know them, front and back and upside down, if I want to get as good as Momma Yzma is with her tarot cards.”

A quick glance to Talon, and Cale shook his head. And that was all Talon could take. Being silent around him was one thing. Refusing his baby sis because he was around was something else.

“What’s your fucking problem?!” His own voice sounded wrong in his ears, a whip crack that earned him silence and openmouthed stares all around.

“Talon Aran May!” Calliope roared from the doorway of the kitchen. She and Momma Yzma stood there, equally appalled faces staring back at him.

Great. His fingers, tense and shaking, curled into fists, and he was ready to tear into the guest for being rude to his family with the silent treatment, if only to defend himself. No one should be allowed to treat him this way; not here, never here.

Cale was red faced, standing stock still except for his mouth. Choked sounds burbled from his throat, forming sounds. “S-S-S-S-S-Ss-Sssor...”

Thorn was at his side, hand on Cale’s shoulder, shaking him, but the sounds just got worse, his face was a shocking shade of red, and even his curls shook from the force of trying to get the word out.

Get the word out.

Fuck.

Talon's spine snapped straight, and before he could stop himself, he was out the door, on the four-by-four and roaring towards his own place. If he was going to stick his foot in his mouth any further, best to do it in private.

Talon slammed the front door so hard that if it broke, it wouldn't have surprised him. Anger and embarrassment warred in his stomach, unwanted, nasty energy that needed to go. Maybe then, he would be able to return and apologize for royally fucking up.

As he paced in front of his couch and tried to decide between lifting weights or meditating, the front door burst open. All right, looked like he had to answer for himself first.

"What the fuck was that about?" Thorn roared, slamming the door behind him.

Deep inhale, count to five, deep exhale. "Pretty obvious, don't you think?" Damn, his voice was as tight as the rest of him.

Thorn crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

"You want to tell me why you invited this guy, huh? For fuck's sake, Thorn, he even asked you at the shop if I would 'mind'. MIND?" Deep inhale, count to five, deep exhale, don't punch a wall. "You think of all the places I go, my own damn home would be one of the spots where I don't have to 'mind' some asshole not being comfortable around me."

That earned him exactly two blinks. "*This is your own damn home.*"

Deep inhale, count to five, deep exhale, don't punch your brother in the dick. "That's not the point and you know it."

"Talon, I'm gonna need you to hear me out, because what I'm about to say is gonna go in one ear and right out the other otherwise." Thorn did his own inhale/hold/exhale thing. "Cale isn't 'uncomfortable' around you. At least, not in the way you're thinking."

Talon thought about the past half hour, then the entire evening, and then the whole two weeks he'd been back. Just like Thorn had said, hearing that the boy was anything but freaked out by him and his height was pretty freaking hard to hear.

"So, what's his deal?"

“You saw his deal.”

“Thorn...”

“The stuttering? The slow talking?”

“...then why won't he fucking look at me?”

Thorn threw his hands up in the air. “What is with you? If he were anyone else, you'd barely blink. Fuck, we joke about the ignorant shit people say about you, about me, about our moms, everything. What's the difference?”

The difference, Talon wanted to tell him, was that he was so drawn to Cale that the mere thought of being rejected for something he couldn't change hurt like a bastard. Call him a “midget”, say that he and Thorn were lying when they said they were brothers, call their mothers hippie dykes who gave all their kids stupid names, and Thorn was right, Talon would have just ignored the insults and kept on with his life. He and his family had nothing to prove to anyone—until Cale.

That mere thought almost kept him from hearing the next thing Thorn said. “I mean, I'd been working on getting him to come over since you got back. The guy's ass-over-teakettle for you. It's hard enough for him to talk, but when you're around, well...”

“Whoa, wait, back up.” Talon needed to sit down. Good thing the couch was just the right size for him to collapse on. “Did you just say ‘ass-over-teakettle’?”

“Talon!”

Put it that way and Talon could see what Thorn was talking about. All that clamming up, the avoidance, and the blushing. That charming-as-hell blushing. Talon groaned, and covered his face with both hands. He was a fucking idiot.

“He's got a stutter,” Talon said without question.

“Yup. He's okay if he slows down, but startle him, and well, you see what you get.”

“I just met him two weeks ago.”

“He saw our family vacay picture at the shop while you were gone, the one next to the register. Hasn't stopped mooning over you since.”

Another groan. “I'm the biggest jackass alive. Where is he?”

Thorn snickered. "On that, we can agree. Calliope got him calmed down and drove him home. The rest of us drew straws to pick who was coming over here to tear you a new asshole. You're lucky you didn't get Momma Yzma."

Thursday came around, and Talon had his apology all ready. He only hoped that he hadn't blown it completely.

And Cale didn't show. He wasn't there the next Monday either. Calliope and Momma Yzma had forgiven him the transgression of ruining dinner after he explained himself, but that didn't stop Calliope from tut-tutting the boy's absence.

"You know," she suggested after Thursday's class, "you could use that phone of yours for more than vacation pictures. Call him."

Oh yeah, he could imagine how that would work. If Cale didn't immediately hang up, Talon was pretty sure he'd hear the world's longest "fuck off" that he damn well deserved.

"Seriously," Tam piped up from the back room, where she was straightening up. "You mope any longer and I'm putting your picture up on Grindr."

It wouldn't be healthy for his nor Calliope's blood pressure to ask the teen how she'd even heard of Grindr. "Fine, I'll ask Thorn for his number. But I'm gonna text him. No need to freak him out, right?"

Suddenly his phone rang in his back pocket. For a brief hopeful moment, he imagined it was Cale, who had gotten his number from his brother and was relieving him of the pressure of making first contact.

Alas, it was only Tam. She had forwarded him a text from Thorn with Cale's number. "There you go. Don't thank me, just talk to him already!"

And since Calliope was still there near the counter, he did the dutiful thing and pecked out a text:

Hey, I'm sorry about dinner last week. Let me make it up to you. Please.

The response came a half hour later, when Talon was ready to jump out of his own skin with the feeling that he was being ignored.

Forget it. I don't do pity dates.

The boy had pride. Who knew that was such a turn on?

Neither do I. When can I pick you up?

His response was much faster this time.

Thorn says you have Saturday off?

Talon owed his brother big time. Hell, he owed his entire family big time.

By the time Saturday rolled around, he was reconsidering that debt to his family.

“This works for a hike.” He stood in his bedroom, unwittingly modeling for the trio of ladies piled on his bed. It was one of the few things in the house he insisted be average-sized (stoves were hard to find that he could use without a step stool, unless they were made of wood or plastic and had fake food); the four-post monstrosity was ridiculously comfortable.

“You could go for a tighter T-shirt,” Tam suggested. “You work out; show it off.”

“Tam O’Shanter May,” Calliope tsiked. “Didn’t we leave you at the house?”

“You also gave me my own four-by-four.”

Momma Yzma motioned to Talon. “Ladies, focus. Talon can’t fuck this up again.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Talon snorted, opening his shirt drawer again. “Jeans and a tee are what I wore when we hiked in the same place. I look like a douche in khakis, and no, I am not packing a suit for dinner later.” Hell, he wanted to banish the word “dinner” from his mind forever.

He did take Tam’s advice, and wore a tighter purple shirt. As he was shooing them down the stairs and out the front door so he could get to the state park on time, Momma Yzma turned to him. “Have a good time, and try to take it slow, alright?”

Calliope snorted, hugging her wife around the waist. “Oh please, Yeezy. We were in bed before the first date and look at us now.”

Tam made a face that Talon was sure he was mirroring. “Hey bro, you got a Q-tip I could use to stab the last five seconds out of my mind?”

“Yeah, upstairs bathroom. Bring one for me too.” Even the most open-minded of souls had limits.

Cale was waiting for Talon as he pulled up. Their eyes met, and he wanted to smack himself for earning that wary glance. Other than that, the redhead looked edible in a black tank that outlined his long torso, and jeans tucked into tan boots, a satchel on his back. He'd volunteered to bring water and trail mix.

Talon got out of the car and pulled out a walking staff, an apology on his lips when Cale held up a finger, his lips trembling as he spoke. “We... s-start... over. Hey... I'm... I'm... C-Cale.”

He extended that hand for Talon to shake, and he took it, a weight lifting off his shoulders. “Nice to meet you. I'm Talon. The trail here is nice. Wanna go for a walk?”

Since that was what they'd planned on doing anyway, Cale smiled, a little laugh bursting out of his lips like a similar weight had been lifted. Talon hoped that Tam's attempt at reading runes for him that morning, when she plucked “kenaz” out of her bag, meant this was his chance to recreate some reality of his own, one where this date would be successful.

The day was warm and got warmer still as they walked. Cale had never tried this trail before, so Talon kept them to a lighter walk. If anything, he could pay better attention to his companion and not, say, trip over his own two feet. The sun really brought out what he found so damned cute about Cale—those freckles, the auburn highlights in his hair, the shine of his teeth.

Talon pointed out his favorite spots on the trail, some of the plant life and what few animals crossed their path. “You have to be careful if you walk through here looking for herbs or mushrooms. You pick the wrong thing and you'll have to explain to the rangers why you have a rash all over your hands.”

“W-What about t-those?” Cale pointed to a cluster of little white mushrooms at the base of a broken tree stump.

Talon squatted down to where he was pointing for a closer look, then nodded. “Perfectly edible, but it's safer to not eat them raw. Besides, you brought trail mix, right?”

Cale rolled his eyes and smiled as he swung the satchel off his back and crouched next to Talon. He pulled out a plastic grocery bag, and used it to

gather the mushrooms without touching them directly. Noticing Talon's curious gaze, Cale turned red and stammered. "A g-g-g-gift for y-yu-y-yooooour..."

He was turning even redder as the next word refused to come out of his mouth. Talon knew what he was getting at. "I know, my..."

Dark brown eyes glared him quiet as Cale tried again, his face contorting with the effort to finish his sentence. Talon wisely shut the hell up until finally, "Mumumumum-Moms!"

The determination in Cale's face got Talon's neck warm in a way the sun couldn't touch. It was a kind of kinship; Cale could damn well speak, if Talon was willing to listen. And with that voice of his, Talon could listen for days. "Awesome. They'll love you forever for it."

They walked for another hour, stopping at a cliff with a beautiful view of the rest of the forest, the trees stretching out like a carpet of dark green for miles and miles. The only thing marking the cliff as anything special was a huge flat rock, about two feet high. Talon remembered this was the spot where the family photo that graced the till was taken. He had climbed up on the rock and, while he still wasn't as tall as Thorn, it was enough to peer over the heads of everyone else.

He gave climbing up the rock another go, using the walking staff as leverage. Thankfully, Cale seemed to have learned the same lesson he had taught Talon about when to help and stayed back. He was dusty all over his nice shirt and jeans, but he had made it.

When he turned around to crow his triumph over gravity, Cale was blushing again, this time with eyes full of mischief. So that was why he didn't try to help Talon up.

"Were you staring at my ass?" Talon teased, and was pleasantly surprised when Cale bit his lips and nodded slowly.

Desire flushed hot in his belly so quickly he had to suck in a breath. The innocent walk had turned into something much more in the space of a tease. If he had any more questions about whether or not Cale found him hot, they were answered with teeth on lips and those smoldering dark eyes. He beckoned the younger man over with two fingers, grabbed his chin the moment Cale was close enough and pulled him in for a kiss.

Shy or not, Cale gave as good as he got, aggressive and rough. Talon grabbed a handful of tank top with his free hand to draw him closer, moving the

other from his chin to all that hair. Cale's hands cupping his ass felt like they belonged there. They could have been doing this weeks ago, he thought regretfully for a moment before distracting himself with Cale's bottom lip between his teeth.

"F-Fuck, Talon." Cale's moan sounded like sex, and made Talon's entire body throb with the need to lose these clothes and lose himself in every possible way with Cale.

"Is that a request?" he panted against Cale's neck, inhaling sweat and sunshine off his skin.

He felt Cale swallow, and kissed at his bobbing Adam's apple. "Yeah."

"Then help me down and let's get out of here."

Cale was evil incarnate.

It was the only thing Talon could think about as he raced over the connecting driveway on the family land. Cale, unwilling to risk them crashing by touching Talon, had lain back in his seat and teased Talon with fingers on his own chest, a hand in his open pants, and moans straight out of the best porn ever.

"Just you wait," Talon warned darkly, taking the right at the split. Just a few more feet and he could stop the car, they could go inside, and he would be able to touch all that tempting skin.

"P-Promises, p-p-p-promises."

Talon managed to get them inside before shoving Cale against the door and yanking those jeans down to his knees, taking the briefs with them. Cale's cock popped free, and by every deities that ever existed, it was as long and lanky as he was, wet and right in front of Talon's face, the perfect height. His mouth watered as he bent his head down to stuff as much as he could fit in it.

Cale moaned, his hips hitching and hands gripping Talon's hair as Talon used his mouth to exact revenge for the teasing in the car. He was going to make the boy come, then drag him upstairs to roll around in his bed. Then maybe, just maybe, they'd do it again. And again.

His plans were interrupted by the sound of someone trying to open the door. Not caring who it was, he threw the lock, and banged his fist against the wood.

“Talon, we’re just checking on you, and you’re not answering your phone,” Calliope’s voice called from the other side as Cale froze up. “How did the date go?”

Talon ripped his mouth away from his treat and snarled. “It was going great until a second ago.”

“Oh. *Oh!*” Her next words were a few feet further. “Well, as you were. Take care, boys!”

Cale laughed, banging the back of his head on the door as his entire body shook.

“What’s so funny?” Talon asked, resting his head on Cale’s hip, unable to keep from chuckling himself. “My family is nosy as hell.”

“They c-care about y-y-you. I l-like them.”

“Well, good, because I think if this didn’t work out the way it is now, they would have disowned me and adopted you.”

They took their time getting back in the mood. Cale insisted on getting naked right at the door, which got Talon back on the redhead’s dick pretty damned quick, his hands running all over the bare freckled skin until Cale shouted to the ceiling and shot his seed down Talon’s hungry throat. He moaned with the delight of swallowing come and holding a thrashing body still while it fought his grasp for the first time in years.

As Cale recovered, Talon took that moment to undress, tossing his things and Cale’s over to the couch. Cale’s eyes raked over his compact body, tracing every single muscle on his frame and lingered on his cock.

He allowed Talon to lead him up the stairs, stopping long enough to pull a short strip of foil wrapped packets from his pocket with another flush. Just knowing Cale had prepared for this date to go as well as it had made Talon’s face hurt from his smile.

They reached the bedroom, and as he started to climb up the built-in carpeted steps, Cale drew his arms around Talon’s chest and threw him on the bed, covering Talon’s body with his own and kissing the back of his neck.

“Eager?” Talon panted, rocking his ass against Cale’s renewed erection. He had thought about topping this time around, but if Cale wanted him like this, no way he was going to object.

“Y-Y-Yeah. Your ass. I-I-It’s p-p-perfect.” Cale pressed his hips down. “But I... want you... to f-f-fuck me. Won’t... last if I... do you.”

Cute, smart, funny, and versatile? Holy shit. “Get on your knees, hands on the headboard, and hang on.”

Cale wasted no time in obeying, giving Talon a view of his adorable little behind. Like the rest of him, it was pale with a dusting of brown spots. Talon couldn’t help getting on hands and knees and licking his way over both cheeks.

“You’re a goddamn walking constellation,” he panted, finding the strip Cale had placed on the bed and tearing one free to suit up.

“Talon,” Cale panted, curving his back, presenting, begging with his body.

“Don’t worry, honey.” Talon soothed him with one hand down his spine. “I’m gonna take care of you real soon.”

Damn the size of the bed, because he had to stop petting Cale to crawl to the other side to retrieve the lube. He was back behind his soon-to-be lover in no time, slicking his cock with one hand and rubbing lube into that tempting dark pucker with the other. Cale humped that hand, then fucked himself on the two fingers Talon eagerly pushed inside.

“Bet y-you... could fit... a hand inside...” Cale whispered.

It was the dirtiest thing anyone had ever said to him, and Talon’s head spun with how much it turned him on. He had to get in this boy, now.

Cock in hand, Talon pulled at Cale’s hip to guide his hole against the head, and then pushed forward, watching with hungry awe as it opened up. Cale sat back with a long, low grunt as his ass swallowed the rest of Talon’s length. Talon tried to speak, to give voice to how amazing all that tight heat felt from the inside, but there was only need, and he had to obey. His body spoke for him, snapping forward and rocking back, gripping Cale’s hips for purchase, leaning back to watch.

Cale’s body responded in kind, moving with him, moans growing louder and more frantic with each push back. Moans turned into gasps, and Cale’s hand slipped from the headboard to his cock. He wasn’t kidding about being close.

Talon started to come before he realized just how close he was as well, forehead pressed against Cale’s sweaty back, jackhammering those last few thrusts as if he could force his spunk through the rubber and deep inside. Cale’s

muscles tensed and trembled against Talon's cheek as he joined him in release, spouting garbled gibberish that could have been his name.

They sat like that, recovering yet again. Talon wrapped his arms around Cale's waist and kissed his spine. "Damn, I never knew you were going to be such a fun fuck."

"...be-tter... than... I-I... dreamed."

And that was the point where Talon's ego grew three sizes that day. Very slowly, they pulled apart and lay under the blanket, sharing a pillow as Cale had shot all over the other one. Talon was more than happy to lie on top, face tucked into Cale's neck, lazily tracing the freckles on his opposite shoulder. It was a comfortable fit. Talon could have dozed off, but there was something he needed to get off his chest.

"Thank you for giving me a second chance."

Cale hugged him even closer, and Talon could feel a smile against his forehead. "Th-Thank you f-for giving *me*... a-a f-first chance."

Two years later

Suits were not Talon's friend. Ill-fitting ones made him feel like a kid at church. When he found one that fit, he wore it until the wheels fell off.

Thankfully, the blue-with-pinstripe number he wore did him so many favors.

He settled in his seat as the robed dean droned off a list of names. He was just at the A's and Talon was already bored silly. Was his graduation this boring for everyone else?

Tam sat at his right, playing some game on her phone with Thorn's fiancée Kelly, and he wished he had the insouciance to haul his own out. But with Cale's mom and dad sitting at his left, that wouldn't make a very good impression at all.

Thankfully, Dean What's-His-Name had a short list of A's, and was on the B names in no time. Everyone in his row leaned in close, peering at the antlike faces of robed students lining up, looking for a peek of red curls. Even Tam had put her phone in her lap and waited.

“Cale Anthony Blake,” the dean announced and the leaners became the cheerers. The smile on Cale’s face grew as he accepted the diploma, then looked up at his family and waved, mouthing, “love you”.

It could have been meant for anyone, but each word hit Talon in the heart. No matter if it was mouthed, spoken, or texted, Cale’s love always did that to him.

The festivities weren’t quite over for their row just yet as they settled down. It would be a great while until they reached the M’s, after all.

Thorn and Cale were posing for a selfie when their families found them on the lawn after the ceremony. Cale’s mother, a tall and stocky woman with the same red curls, hugged her son close and both Momma Yzma and Calliope squeezed Thorn between them.

“I swear if Martha smiles any harder, she’ll burst.” Cale’s dad, Steven, said at Talon’s side.

Talon felt the same way, actually. Between his brother and his boyfriend getting their bachelor’s, his heart could barely contain his joy. He nodded. “Hey, it’s not every day graduation happens.”

“True, true.” Steven touched Talon’s shoulder, getting his direct attention. “So, two weeks alone together?”

“Yeah. I thought Puerto Rico sounded like a great place for him to unwind.”

“D-D-Dad, are y-you giving him a haaard time?” Cale was suddenly within reach, but Talon held back as his father shook his hand, and then pulled him in for a hug.

“No, sweetie, he’s trying to give the ‘what are your intentions towards my son’ talk, two years too late.” Martha bent down to kiss Talon’s cheek. “Ignore him.”

Finally, Cale was close, kneeling and uncaring if anyone watched him wrap his smaller boyfriend in his arms and kiss him for all to see. A shutter snapped, and Talon knew it was Tam taking a picture. Good, as long as she sent him a copy.

“Look at that. Just call me a yenta,” Thorn crowed, arm around Kelly’s waist. “So, Tam, want me to work my magic on you?”

“No,” Tam, Momma Yzma, Calliope, and even Kelly replied in unison. Cale laughed the loudest of them all, kissing Talon chastely.

“Aww, come on, we’ve got two satisfied customers right here.” He motioned to Talon. “I’m a genius.”

Talon ignored his brother to press his forehead against Cale’s. “Congrats. Looking forward to the beach?”

Cale nodded and whispered. “C-Can we ditch dinner and go b-back to yooour place?”

“Nope.” He laughed at the little pout. “My family would tease us, and yours would be so sad. Besides, tomorrow we’ll have all of the time in the world.”

“And no one will be trying to open your hotel room door.” Tam added with a smirk. “Can we go now? I’m starving!”

Talon rolled his eyes and took Cale’s hand as he stood up and followed their little tribe off the green.

The End

Author Bio

Nicole Forcine was born a strange child and former Georgia peach. When she was younger, she was never far from a composition book, a pen in hand, and way too many people in her head (she's even been known to talk back to them). When two or more of them talk loud enough to overshadow the rest, a story is born. After years of writing and storing her tales in those books, she had a revelation: man, there are a lot of dudes kissing in these stories.

Her stories include themes of creating families of choice, how love can come in all forms and supersede all boundaries, and the joys and sorrows of earning a happily-ever-after.

Currently, she resides in Minneapolis with one of the most laid-back men in history and his even more laid-back cat and her adorable kitty Prince who never does anything wrong. When she's not writing (ha!), she's saving the world/galaxy/humanity as we know it in the world of video games and general geekiness.

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